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'Well you can, Roy' They come!

The X Bar X Boys at Rustlers' Gap

JAMES CODY FERRIS



HAMLIN WESTERNS
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Chapter I

THE MYSTERIOUS SHOTS

"A ride like this adds five years to your life," exclaimed Roy Manley, as he eased the reins on the neck of his favourite pony, Star, who looked around at him, whinnied, and came to a stop.

"Sure does. Best morning I ever saw," agreed Roy's fifteen-year-old brother Teddy, who was riding close behind. "See old Rocky Run River down there. Looks like a silver snake running across the range."

The boys were half-way to the peak of a high mountain trail, several miles from their home at the X Bar X ranch. The trail at that point was a narrow and rocky one. On one side was a sheer precipice, while on the other, giant rocks and trees crowded together on the slope. A drop on either side would seem to mean almost certain death.

"If we only had the glasses," went on Teddy enthusiastically, "we could see—— Hey! Look out! Roy! Oh, stop!"

A red fox had suddenly streaked across the trail. Star, usually not nervous, had been startled by its sudden appearance. He gave a jump forward, stumbled on a protruding root, and Roy, not expecting the sudden move, shot over his head towards the chasm at the right of the trail.

He reached for an outstanding branch and grasped it. It broke under his weight and he hurtled over the edge of the ravine, landing on the top of a tree which grew on the side of the incline.

The tree shook mightily as Roy hit it; bent backwards with a sudden motion, then righted itself again as the weight was released. Its leaves quivered for an instant.

They became still, and Teddy was alone on the trail.

So quickly had it all happened that Teddy Manley could scarcely realise it. One minute Roy had been on the trail by his side. The next, he was alone, with Roy gone over the brink of the cliff.

Cautiously and with great care, so as not to slip himself, Teddy crawled to the edge and tried to look over. He could see nothing but a tangled mass of trees and branches with sharp protruding rock in between.

"Roy!" he shouted. "Roy! Are you there?"

His voice sounded queer and faint, even to himself.

"Roy!" he called again, this time more shrilly. "Roy, are you hurt? Can you hear me?"

There was no answer. Not a sound but the whinny of the two ponies, who were standing close together a short distance up the trail.

A great fear gripped Teddy's heart. A wave of intense suffering swept over him. He shook from head to foot as if taken with a chill. It was hardly possible that Roy could be alive. No man could be hurled, as he had been, into the ravine and not be torn and maimed.

With blurred eyes, Teddy tried again to pierce that screen of leaves and branches, but could not. Then a sudden hope came over him. He had not heard a crashing, as would have been the case had Roy gone to the bottom of the ravine. It might be that he was only stunned, and, perhaps, hanging from a limb.

"Roy!" he shouted again with all his might. "Roy. Where are you?"

Then, it seemed from beneath his feet, he heard an answering call.

"Hullo-oo!"

In his excitement Teddy Manley crawled dangerously near the edge. The dirt began to crumble and give way. He dug his toes into the soft earth and drew himself slowly back.

"Where are you, Roy?" he shrilled.

The answer came faintly, and, as before, seemingly from the ground beneath.

"On a ledge of rock, right under the trail. When I landed on the top of that tree it bent over and threw me up here."

"Are you hurt?" Teddy's voice quavered in his excitement.

"No; only scratched. But this ledge is narrow. I can't move much."

"Thank goodness, you're safe!" Teddy closed his eyes for just a moment as a feeling of weakness came over him. Then he braced himself. It was no time to be weak.

"I'll get you up," he shouted. "Keep still and don't move until I've thought out a way."

"Right-o."

Teddy laughed happily at the word. "Good old Roy. He is always like that. Never afraid. Dear God, show me how to get him up," he prayed.

Used to rapid thinking, Teddy Manley's thoughts fairly raced. To get Roy up on the trail again would be a comparatively easy matter with the aid of a rope. Each of the boys always carried a lariat on their rides, and they must serve. Twisted together Teddy felt sure they would be strong enough to support Roy's weight.

In a twinkling, Teddy had caught the two horses, and began to braid the lariats together. Completed, they formed a strong rope. Teddy tied one end of it strongly to Star's saddle and the other around a stone which he dropped over the edge of the cliff.

"I'm sending down a rope with a stone on it," he shouted to Roy. "You get hold of it when it swings by, and I'll pull you up."

"Right-o." It was a weird sound, that voice coming from beneath his feet, but Teddy laughed happily as he heard it again.

"Here she goes," he called, as he swung the rope to and fro, over the edge. "Catch it, Roy."

The weighted rope swung like a pendulum. Then Teddy heard a crashing as the stone slipped off and went hurtling downwards.

"Try again," said the faint voice from below. "I almost had it."

Teddy tied on another stone, but that, too, slipped off before Roy could catch the rope.

"Make a cradle out of some branches," Roy suggested. "That ought to hold the stone on. I've got a stick I can hook it with as soon as it gets within reach."

Teddy tied several small branches together, thus making a cradle in which the stone rested securely. Then he swung the rope over the cliff again. This time it went within reach of Roy's stick, and Teddy felt it tighten as Roy clutched it.

"I've got it!" Roy shouted exultantly. "Now, I'll swing out. Hold tight up there. Be with you in a second."

Teddy sprang to Star's head, and as the rope grew taut, he urged the pony up the trail. There was a great thrashing in the top of a tree, and in another minute Roy came scrambling over the edge of the cliff and up on to the trail. Then it was that something seemed to snap in Teddy's head and he slumped to the ground. It was only a minute before he opened his eyes. Roy was rubbing his wrists.

"Good old Ted!" Roy's eyes were shining at his brother's emotion. "Thought I was done for, did you? But you can't get rid of me as easily as that, I'll tell a maverick. Not hurt a bit, Ted, only a few scratches."

"Got father's package?" Teddy sat up suddenly and seemed inclined to change the conversation.

"Yes; all safe," and Roy patted his coat. "It's some papers he needs to complete a deal. They're important. I wouldn't like to go home without them after he sent us for them." Then, as the boys mounted their ponies

and started up the trail again, he added: "Haven't had so much fun since we were at Nugget Camp."

Teddy grinned. Now that Roy was safe and unhurt he was himself again.

"That was a great bunch of waddies down there," he said. "I'm glad everything turned out as well as it did. Think of old Maryland making forty thousand dollars! The old fellow never saw so much money in his life before, I'll wager."

"We didn't do so badly ourselves," laughed Roy. "I'll never forget the look on father's face when I showed him that cheque for twenty-five thou."

"The best of it all," he went on, "was catching that scoundrel Greyhound. He got his, all right, and I'm not a bit sorry. Allen, too, the low-down blackmailer. He'll have a chance to think up lots of schemes before those twenty years are over."

"The boys are coming back to the X Bar X ranch," interrupted Teddy. "Nick Looker and Jim Casey, Nat Raymond and Gus Tripp. The 8 X 8 crowd are drifting in there, too. Gosh, it's great to be alive, isn't it, Roy?"

Crack!

Roy brought Star to a sudden stop and listened intently.

"What was that?" he asked, turning to Teddy.

"Sounded like a shot," said Teddy excitedly. "It's on the other side of the mountain. Didn't know there was any one around these days. Maybe it's——"

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Again came the whiplike snap, this time more clearly and multiplied into three. Roy's eyes grew grave.

"We'll have to investigate," he said. "It will take us some distance out of our way, but it can't be helped. I'm afraid there's something wrong. There've been some cows missing from the 8 X 8 lately, Mr. Ball told me. I'd like to get a line on the rustlers who are driving them off."

"Come on!" Teddy's eyes shone. He was always ready for a frolic or a fight.

The trail went around and around and twisted back and forth like a huge serpent, in its ascent of the hill. The boys allowed their ponies to pick their way. Both Star and Flash, the pony Teddy rode, were sure-footed and good climbers. The boys would have liked to go faster, but they knew better than to urge the broncos up the steep pitch in the trail.

For an hour or more they rode on without hearing or seeing anything suspicious. Then they topped the peak of the trail and started to go slowly down the other side of the mountain. Roy, almost sorry that he had given way to the impulse to try to find where the shots had come from, was just about to suggest turning back when he thought he heard a faint cry that came from farther down the trail.

"Listen!" he said, reining in his pony.

"Don't hear anything," said Teddy promptly. "Nothing except the sighing of the pines. You are hearing things, Roy."

"It was a cry," said Roy positively. "A man's cry. It wasn't shrill enough for a woman. There it is again!"

This time the cry came more clearly once, twice.

"Come on." Roy held Star with a firm hand as the pony started down the steep incline. "It's not very far away," he added. "Some one is in trouble, Teddy. I wish I'd brought my rifle. Our pistols are all right for close at hand, but if we have to shoot at a distance, a rifle's the thing."

"We'll get along all right, though," said Teddy, with supreme faith in his elder brother. "Reckon we won't have to do any shooting."

The boys kept on down the trail, picking their way along the winding road, which at times was nothing more than a narrow path. On either side, the trees grew

in dense masses, and it was impossible to get a view of the surrounding country.

Once Flash slipped on the carpet of leaves and nearly threw Teddy. But the boy was a good rider, and held the reins tightly, ready to check the pony should he stumble.

"Careful, Flash," he cautioned, and the little bronco seemed to know that he must be sure-footed.

A hundred yards farther on, the boys heard the cry again. This time it came from a clump of cottonwoods, some distance to the right of the trail.

"Help!"

The boys dismounted, trailed their reins, and crept through the thick underbrush towards the cottonwoods whence the sound had come. Several times they stopped to listen, but could hear nothing. The bending boughs and branches scratched their arms and faces, and the sharp edges of the rocks bit into their jackets and tore holes, but they kept on. Then, almost at their side, came the cry again.

"Help! Help!"

Pushing through the brush, Roy and Teddy found themselves in a small clearing. There, tied to a tree, were two men. One, an elderly man with a gash across his forehead, was moaning and crying for help. The other, much younger, scowled darkly and strained with all his might to break the cords that bound him.

Chapter II

THE ATTACK

It did not take the X Bar X boys long to release the men. With a few quick slashes of his hunting knife, Roy cut the ropes that held them prisoners. The older of the two slumped down upon a rock and began to feel carefully of his head, which had been cut. The other stretched and

flexed his muscles and, while stiff, did not seem otherwise injured by his experience.

"Lucky you waddies came along when you did," he said in a low, cultivated voice. "If you hadn't we might have been tied here all day long."

"What happened?" Roy's voice was eager as he began to rub the man's arms.

"Jake there," explained the man, pointing to his companion, who was still rubbing his head, "and I were making the trail and we stopped here to rest a minute. All of a sudden a bunch of roughnecks jumped at us and began firing."

"We heard it," interrupted Teddy. "That's why we came down here. About an hour ago, wasn't it?"

The man nodded.

"About that. Jake and I returned their fire, and we hit a couple of them. But they were too many for us and rushed in. They took our guns, and after hitting Jake on the head because he resisted, they tied us up and left us here."

Roy and Teddy exchanged quick glances.

"It's those rustlers," said Roy. "The ones Bug Eye told us about, being round 8 X 8 ranch. It's getting serious when they hold men up and rob them, too. The boys will have to get after them."

"You bet," snapped the man called Jake, who had not spoken before. "Those bozos ought to be strung to a tree. If I ever get my hands on 'em, there'll be swingin' shadders agin the sky that won't look real purty. Gosh, how my head hurts where the waddy hit me!"

"We'll do it up for you," said Roy. "There's a first-aid kit with some liniment in it on one of the ponies. They're just up on the trail. I'll go and get them. And you, Teddy, get some water from that brook I hear. We'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

While the boys are gone, there is a good opportunity to tell the reader, who may not have met them before, a little of their history.

The X Bar X ranch, owned by Bardwell Manley, the boys' father, was the largest in that vicinity. Because of a shortage of help, he had taken the boys out of school to work on the ranch, and they were anything but sorry. Life on the plains was the greatest adventure that could come to them, they thought, and they revelled in it.

The X Bar X Boys on the Ranch, the first volume of this series, tells how Teddy and Roy Manley, after many exciting adventures and serious trials, at last captured a band of cattle rustlers.

In *The X Bar X Boys at Nugget Camp*, the volume preceding the present one, is told the exciting story of the gold rush, in which the Manley boys joined. The perils that they underwent and their final triumph over a gang bent on their ruin, make interesting reading.

When Roy returned, leading the ponies, he found the two men in close conversation. At the sight of him they separated, and the younger man went over and leaned upon Star's saddle.

"Nice-looking bronc you've got there," he said admiringly, patting the pony's neck. "Wouldn't mind if I had one just like him. Live far from here?"

"Quite a piece." Roy was busy opening the first-aid kit and taking out a roll of bandage. "We're from the X Bar X ranch. I'm Roy Manley and this is Teddy, my brother," he explained, as the younger boy came crashing through the underbrush with an old tin pan he had found, filled with water.

Roy dipped a piece of the cloth in the water and began to wash the wound on Jake's forehead.

"Easy there," he growled. "That bozo certainly hit me an awful wallop with that gun of his. I'm seeing stars yet."

"You'll feel better soon," Roy assured him, as he tore off a longer piece of the roll and began to bind up the man's head. "Standing in the sun so long didn't help

any. There's some liniment in the kit," he called to the other man who was still examining Star and his saddle.

"I've found it. Gosh, it stings where those ropes cut in. But, as the poet says, 'every rose has its thorn'. No use of putting up a kick. Here, kid," turning to Teddy. "Get another pan of water, will you? Never knew when I was so dry. Step on it!"

Teddy flashed the man an angry look, and hesitated. He was not used to being spoken to like that. He did not like it. Who was this man who was ordering him around? In that instant a suspicion that there was trouble ahead came to Teddy Manley. He was half a mind to refuse to go to the brook again. Then he thought better of it and, picking up the pan, trudged away.

Bing!

Something hard suddenly descended on Roy's head. For a minute he seemed to be in a shower of stars. He reached out gropingly, tried to grasp something that was not there, hesitated for an instant as if undecided what to do, then crumpled in a heap to the ground.

The next thing he knew, he saw through a blur the younger man levelling his own pistol at him, while Jake was enacting the same scene with Teddy.

"Stick 'em up, waddies. Reach for the sky. That's better," as the boys lifted their hands. "Now we've got you where we want you. Here, Jake," handing the man Teddy's pistol, "keep these two kids covered while I round up things. And don't forget to shoot if they get at all gay."

Roy, still dazed from the blow on the head, looked on stupidly, but Teddy was ablaze with indignation.

"This is a fine way to treat us after we've tried to help you!" he shouted. "Here, get away from him," as the younger man started towards Flash. Forgetful for the moment of Jake with the two guns, Teddy sprang forward.

Crack!

The hat flew from Teddy's head and a hot streak burned across his forehead.

"Steady, youngster. Don't do that again," snarled Jake. "Remember I can shoot straight. Won't be so particular the next time where I aim. Up with 'em again, kid."

Teddy slowly raised his hands and cast an appealing look at Roy.

"They've got the drop on us," said Roy. "We've got to make the best of it, Ted. They've got our guns and we can't fight them."

"You bet your life you can't," snapped Jake. "Now shell out, and make it snappy. Everything out of your pockets, you," motioning to Roy.

In another minute Roy had emptied his pockets of a couple of knives, his watch and chain and a few dollars in money.

"That package in your inside pocket, too," commanded Jake. "Out with it."

Roy hesitated. "That's father's," he expostulated. "It's nothing you want, but it means a lot to him. Let us keep it and you can keep everything else."

Crack!

The pistol crashed and the shot tore a little hole in the sleeve of Roy's coat.

"That's my answer. Won't be so polite if I have to speak again. Out with that package."

Reluctantly, Roy tossed the package on the pile with the rest of his belongings.

"Now you, kid." The younger man was speaking to Teddy. "I'll trouble you to follow your brother's example. Be quick about it. I've a sneaking idea that our friends of this morning may drop around again. If they do, it won't be very pleasant for any of us."

"It's a downright shame to rob us like this, after we tried to help you," spluttered Teddy. "But we'll get even. I know now who you are. You're the rustlers

who've been riding the cattle from the 8 X 8 ranch. Wait until we get the punchers after you, it will be a different story."

"Thank you for a very pleasant morning," said the younger man, ignoring Teddy's warning, and bowing mockingly to Roy. "Now then, Jake, we'll keep them covered until we get away with the bröncs. It was sure nice of you to present us with such fine little ponies."

The two men backed away, keeping the X Bar X boys covered with their pistols. Then they sprang upon Star and Flash and, urging the broncos forward, dashed through the underbrush and on to the trail. The boys could hear the clatter of the ponies' hoofs as they hit the stony path. Fainter and fainter came the sound, until it was lost in the distance.

The two boys, at the same instant, turned and looked into each other's eyes. Roy reached out and put his arm affectionately around Teddy's shoulders.

"So that's that," he said, with a grin. "How's the head where that rascal creased you? Hurt much?"

Teddy's eyes blazed. "That's nothing," he said. "But they've got Star and Flash and father's package. Oh, Roy, if we could only have fought them off!"

"We couldn't." Roy's tone was decisive. "They had the drop on us with those guns. Besides, if they hadn't had, they're much bigger men than we are. Never mind, Ted. They win for the time being, but we'll get them in the end. Now let me fix your head before we start."

Teddy let Roy bathe his creased forehead, but refused absolutely to let him bandage it.

"Fine-looking object I'd be, walking in with my head in a sling," he objected, and Roy did not insist.

"Wonder what time it is," Roy said, and reached for his watch, then grinned at the empty pocket. "Can tell near enough by the sun," looking at the sky. "Reckon it's about two o'clock. Well, here we are. Fifteen miles from home, strapped, busted, unhorsed, and with

nothing in our stomachs since morning. Mine feels like a ravine already. Think we can make it, Ted?"

"Sure!" Teddy's eyes flashed. "I'm game."

"Right-o!" Roy took a hitch in his belt. "Let's be on our way."

Three hours later two very tired, dusty, and hungry boys limped from the mountain trail into the road, near which, several miles farther on, was the X Bar X ranch. They had hardly gone a hundred yards when far in the distance they saw a great cloud of dust and heard the loud chug-chugging of a wheezing motor.

"It's Bug Eye with that car of his he made from three left-over machines!" shouted Teddy excitedly. "Now for a ride home."

With the exhaust of his car shrieking, and a great groaning and screeching of brakes, Bug Eye arrived, stopped and jumped to the road. He was an eccentric puncher on the 8 X 8 ranch and a great friend of the boys, always ready to chaff them.

"Most noble knights of the road," he began with a low bow, "may I have the pleasure of escorting you in my chariot to whither you are bound? I wish you to inform me why you are walking? What happened to the broncs?"

"You animated cheese sandwich!" retorted Teddy. "You don't suppose we're walking for our health, do you? We've been robbed, cleaned out, shot at, and our broncs taken. Aside from that we're all right."

Bug Eye opened his big eyes wider than ever. The words came tumbling over each other.

"Who did it? Where? Did they take the broncs? Which way did they go? Did you follow them?"

"Whoa there, Bug Eye. Put a cinch strap on your tongue. Give a fellow a chance. It was this way," and Teddy briefly told the cowpuncher what had happened.

Bug Eye leaped into the car. "Jump in," he commanded. "We'll trail those fellows and get them. What's

the matter, chariot?" as the car wheezed and shook but refused to move.

"We can't chase them with this old boat," protested Roy. "They could hear it shouting a mile off, 'I'm coming, look out.' No, Bug Eye, take us back to the X Bar X. I want to tell father about the loss of his package as soon as possible. Then we'll decide what to do."

Bug Eye reluctantly agreed. It took him fully five minutes to get the car started, but at last with a grumble and wheeze and a groan, it began to move.

"Hurrah, we're off!" Bug Eye shouted, waving his hat. "Get out of the way, common trash, the old chariot's coming! On to X Bar X!"

Chapter III THE HOMECOMING

Bardwell Manley was a man who fairly radiated the atmosphere of the West. There was something about him that suggested the plains, the surging of restless cattle, the strength that comes from close association with the great outdoors. He had chosen to be a rancher as his life work, and had never regretted it.

From a small, neglected farm he had built the X Bar X into the biggest ranch of its kind in that vicinity. He was proud of what he had accomplished, proud of his wife and of his children, whom he loved with a passionate affection.

Belle Ada, at the age of thirteen, with her dark, laughing eyes and wavy hair, was the only girl, and his especial favourite. It was the two boys, however, that the father looked to, when work was heavy and labour scarce, to meet an emergency. They were always ready to jump in at a moment's notice to do anything that was required. Fearless riders and crack shots with both pistol and rifle, the boys loved ranch life, and had pleaded earnestly not to be sent back to school again.

That morning they had gone on an errand for their father to a point on the other side of Mica Mountain. Certain important papers were to be secured, which Mr. Mapley needed to complete a business deal he had in view. The boys should have been back by noon. It was now nearly five o'clock, and Bardwell Manley was pacing nervously up and down the veranda of the X Bar X ranch-house, where Mrs. Manley and Belle Ada were sewing.

With a little jump, Belle Ada landed several feet from her chair and flung an arm affectionately around her father's neck.

"Worried, dad, because the boys haven't come?"

Mr. Manley patted Belle Ada's pink cheek before he replied:

"No-o, not exactly worried. The boys can take care of themselves, I reckon. But they ought to have been home long ago. I can't think what has detained them."

"Bet they've gone over to the 8 X 8 to see Nell Willis and Ethel Carew and will bring the girls back with them. They were expecting to come over for a few days. I hope they do. They're great fun, aren't they, dad?"

"They certainly are. For city girls, I think they've learned our western ways pretty well in the time they've been here. Hello, what's that coming? Looks like a sand-storm."

Far down the road there had appeared a great cloud of dust. This was accompanied by a groaning and wheezing and a rasping screech that suggested a steam calliope with a cold. Over all could be heard the chug-chug of a sputtering motor, which coughed violently and then stopped as if for breath.

Belle Ada ran down the steps.

"It's Bug Eye!" she cried. "He's got that funny old car he put together with junk." Then as the "chariot" came nearer, "Why, the boys are with him! Something must have happened! Where did they leave their horses?"

With a flourish Bug Eye drew up before the ranch-house steps. That is, that was what he intended to do. The "chariot", however, had other plans. It snorted and screeched and appeared to be about to climb the steps. Just as it reached them it changed its mind and began to back. Bug Eye was desperately working the levers.

"Whoa there, you busted fool. Don't you know better than to act up like that the first time you've been out in company? Gee whillikins, I'll teach yer!" and Bug Eye seized a wrench as if contemplating some physical damage to the belligerent auto.

With a little squeak, as if of fear, the car ceased to back, ran forward a few feet, and then stopped with a groan.

In another moment the boys had jumped out, and with one bound landed on the ranch veranda.

"Here we are, dad!"

Roy answered his father's glance of inquiry with a shake of the head, by which he meant to imply he did not want to alarm his mother. The lady with the golden hair and blue eyes, however, had quickly seen the streak of red on Teddy's forehead.

"My boy, you've been hurt! You're wounded! Some one has shot you! You must let me bind it up."

Teddy put his arm around his mother's waist and gave her a bearish hug, while he laid his cheek against hers.

"I'm all right, Mumsey dear. It's nothing but a scratch. The worst of it is they got Star and Flash and——"

"They're gone?" burst in Belle Ada excitedly. "Some one has taken them? Stolen the ponies?"

"Yes, and father's package, too. And all after we tried to help them. The low-down rats!"

"Come, Teddy," Mrs. Manley insisted. "I want to put some salve and a bandage on your head. It will make it feel better. You can tell me all that has happened while I'm fixing it," and she led the protesting Teddy into another room.

Roy's eyes met those of his father.

"Is that right, son? Were you robbed of the broncos and the package? Tell me about it."

Roy sat down on a settee and crossed one leg over the other. Now that it was all over and he was safe at the X Bar X, he began to feel the reaction from the excitement and was exceedingly weary.

Not mentioning his fall over the cliff, Roy told briefly the experience that he and Teddy had been through.

The arrival of Bug Eye and his screeching "chariot", whose groans and wheezes could be heard for a long distance, had brought some of the cowboys to the ranch-house. Nick Looker, Roy's especial friend among the punchers, was the first to arrive. Tall and straight, without a pound of superfluous flesh, Nick was a perfect specimen of the western cowboy.

At his heels had come Pop Burns, the old-timer of the X Bar X. Pop's white, bald head was shining in the sun, and his wiry, lithe body leaped forward at every step, a motion that everybody laughed at, but of which Pop was proud, as it enabled him to "get there" quickly.

The two men had come up just as Roy began to tell his story. They listened to it intently, together with Bug Eye who, now that his chariot was anchored for the time at least, enjoyed hearing the boys' adventures the second time.

"An' I found 'em and brung 'em home," he interrupted. "If I hadn't, they'd been walkin' yet. Too bad the old chariot hollers so," he went on, "or we'd have ketched those fellers, sure. But my, they could tell we were coming a mile off. She sure does like to advertise herself."

"I'll tell a maverick she docs," Roy laughed. "But we're mighty glad you showed up, Bug Eye, or else, as you say, we'd be walking yet."

Mr. Manley was looking grimly in front of him, deep in trying to solve the problem that had come up.

"Of course, I'm sorry to have you boys lose your watches and the ponies," he said. "But it's the loss of that package that concerns me the most. It's of no use to any one besides myself, but I suppose those fellows——"

"That's what I told them," interrupted Roy. "But they wouldn't listen to reason. Fired at me when I protested," and Roy showed the hole that Jake's bullet had made in his coat.

Mr. Manley examined the sleeve where the bullet had gone through and his face grew grave.

"It was a close call," he said. "I'd rather have my boy safe and sound than all the documents in the world." He paused for a moment, then went on: "The men have got a good start and are probably miles away by this time. Star and Flash can travel when they have to, and the men undoubtedly will speed them to the limit."

"What I can't figure out," said Nick Looker, speaking for the first time, "is who those fellows were who tied the two hombres to the trees. It's a mighty funny thing to do, and I can't understand it."

"Funny, nothin'!" broke in Pop Burns. "You don't know them wranglers and rustlers like I do, Nick. Most likely a rival gang who came on 'em sudden like and were too many for 'em. Or it might be," and Pop stopped to scratch his grizzled chin reflectively, "'twas some of their own crowd who double-crossed 'em. Wouldn't put it past those onery rustlers to do a thing like that. Why, when I was on the Crooked S ranch——"

At this juncture the door opened and Teddy pranced on to the veranda. His head was wound about with a white bandage which Mrs. Manley had deftly tied into place, after anointing the injured forehead liberally with a herb salve whose healing qualities were famous among the ranchers of the X Bar X neighbourhood.

"Look-ee, ladies and gentlemen," said Teddy, running up to Belle Ada and seizing her by the waist.

"The dancing mummy from the old world," and he swung Belle Ada along the veranda in a wild dance.

"Oh, Teddy, don't, you'll muss me all up! The girls are coming over and I just got dressed up. Guess you're not much hurt if you're so lively as that," and Belle Ada pressed her lips softly to her brother's cheek.

"You had a close call, too, Ted," said Mr. Manley, walking over and putting his hand affectionately on his son's shoulder. "Roy has told us all about it. I'm thankful you got off as well as you did."

"But, father," burst out Teddy, his eyes blazing, "what a low-down thing to do after we had helped them and Roy had fixed Jake's head!"

"You bet it was a low-down thing," said Nick grimly. "I'd like to get my hands on those fellows for a few minutes! They'd know something was happening!"

"Me, too." Pop Burns glared fiercely and his whiskers bristled like the quills on a porcupine. "Yes, sir, I'd just like to get hold of those onery cowards. Fancy shootin' our boys up like they did."

"I don't mind that so much," said Teddy. "It's losing Flash and Star and father's package. Their taking everything after we'd been kind to them. That's what gets me."

"It's the way of the world, son," said Mr. Manley, smiling. "Many a man has been bitten by the dog he fed. We'll see if we can get a line, though, on who the men are and where they've gone. I'll ride down to Ball's ranch after supper, and——"

"Whoopee, look who's comin'!" shrilled Bug Eye excitedly, pointing down the road at a cloud of dust. "It's the waddies from the 8 X 8. I bet they've got some news to tell us, or they wouldn't be comin' along like a streak of greased lightning. Hey, you, this ain't no rodeo," he shouted, as the men came dashing up.

In another instant the ranchers had leaped down from their saddles and were crowding around the Manley

family on the veranda of the X Bar X, who waited eagerly to hear what they had to say.

Chapter IV

VISITORS FROM THE 8 X 8

Peter Ball of the 8 X 8 ranch was a close friend of Bardwell Manley. Although entirely different in temperament and appearance, Ball being a nervous, wiry man in contrast to Manley's stalwart build and more even disposition, the two got along together famously and depended on each other for help in any emergency that might arise.

The cowboys of the two ranches, while sometimes in a good-humoured clash, were also friendly, and when anything happened at either place to disturb the peace of the punchers, the other ranch was immediately advised and, if need be, help was extended.

The sudden rush of punchers from the 8 X 8 to the X Bar X that afternoon was a sure sign that something unusual had happened, and the Manley family crowded around them, eager to hear the news.

Pat Carey, a tall, lean, hatchet-faced puncher, the muscles of whose arms showed like whipcords, was the spokesman for the party.

"Heard what happened on Mica Mountain this morning?" he asked Mr. Manley.

"What?" Mr. Manley's face assumed a worried expression.

"Three or four of us from the 8 X 8 were trailing some steers that had strayed, or we thought they had, when we came upon a couple of hombres we thought might have driven them off. Strangers in this section. They put up a fight and shot Gil Brady in the leg. But we were too many for them. We roped them and tied them up and——"

Roy's face blazed.

"What time was that?" he interrupted eagerly.

"Just before noon. But, as I was sayin', we hadn't got anythin' actually agin the waddies, except suspicion, so we thought we'd be on the safe side and go after Sheriff Hayden. But when we got back with the sheriff this afternoon, they were gone. Found the ropes we'd tied them with, cut. Probably some of the gang found them and set them free. Thought we'd come over and tell you, Mr. Manley, so you could be on the look-out. They're rustlers all right, and I reckon they're planning a raid."

At once Roy's face paled and then flushed crimson.

"Was one of them a rough, oldish sort of man, with a cut on his forehead, and the other, younger, a rather educated fellow?"

"Yes, that's them. Did you see them?"

"They're the two fellows who robbed us and took our ponies," interrupted Teddy. "They shot me in the head and tried to kill Roy. Gosh, I wish we'd known!"

"But how did they get free? That's what I want to know!" exclaimed Pat.

"It was all our fault," explained Roy. "We did it. But we didn't know, of course, it was you boys who'd tied them up. They gave as a song and dance about being attacked by rustlers, robbed and tied. We let them loose and then——"

"And while Roy was fixing the old waddy's cut," burst out Teddy, still indignant at the treatment they had received, "he hit Roy on the head. Then they took our pistols and shot at me. That's why I'm wearing my head in a bandage," he went on. "After they'd cleaned us out they got on our ponies and rode off. We had to hoof it home."

"An' I found 'em and brung 'em in," shrilled Bug Eye, "in my ol' chariot. If it hadn't been for me they'd been walkin'——"

A loud groan went up from the ranchers of the 8 X 8 which drowned out Bug Eye's explanation.

"Of all the fool things to do!" cried Pat Carey angrily, glaring fiercely at the two X Bar X boys. "After we got them roped. Thought you boys had more sense than to do a thing like that. Why, any five-year-old kid would know better than——"

"Easy, there, Pat." Nick Looker stepped forward and looked the puncher squarely in the eye. "The boys had no way of telling the men's story wasn't true. If you'd left a sign—'gone for the sheriff'—it would have been different. No, they couldn't have done anything else."

Pat reluctantly assented, but it was evident that the men of the 8 X 8 were nettled at having lost their prisoners.

Roy's face was flushed with shame.

"That's one on me, Pat," he said, "and I'm terribly sorry. But as Nick says, we didn't know. I won't be fooled like that another time, though! Never again, I'll tell a maverick! But we ought to be getting after them, oughtn't we?" he added, looking at his father.

"No use going after them to-night," interposed Mr. Manley. "We don't know which way they went. They'll be back, I'm thinking, and probably will bring some more with them. I don't think they're operating alone. We must be on the watch."

Pop Burns, who had been listening intently, squirmed his wiry, little figure through the crowd.

"I'll bet that educated gent you hombres tell of is Harvard Hooley," he said cagerly. "Nice-spoken chap, using fine words, and as slick as they make 'em. Haven't heard of him for a long time. Was thinkin' t'other day he might show up here soon. Ycs, sir, that's Harvard all right."

"Tell us about him, Pop," said Nick Looker. "Where'd you meet up with him anyway?"

"'Twas when I was visiting for a spell on the Crooked S ranch a year ago," began Pop Burns, nothing loth to

be the centre of attraction. "That hombre, Hooley, came up there and made out he was from Harvard College, which is somewhere back East, I reckon. Ranching for his health, he said. Was a nice-spoken feller and got a job for a while on the Crooked S. Then, all of a sudden, he left. 'Bout that time they began to miss some cattle. Half a dozen at a time would go. One day they come upon Harvard Hooley and another feller driving some of the steers. The waddies opened fire, but Hooley and the other hombre got away. Haven't heard of him since. Yes siree, that's Hooley all right!"

"Can't we start after him to-night, dad?" Roy asked earnestly. "I shan't be happy until I get your package back."

"And Star and Flash!" added Teddy. "And our pistols and watches. Let's start to-night, dad."

"I'm with you!" Pop cried, excited at the prospect of rounding up the rustler.

"Me, too!" shouted half a dozen of the cowboys in unison.

Mr. Manley shook his head.

"I don't think we'd better go off on a wild-goose chase," he said. "Hooley has undoubtedly taken himself off by this time, and we'd better wait for him to return, to have another try. He can't use the papers he got of mine. We'll have to find you and Teddy new mounts," smiling at the boys' eagerness to be revenged. "I'll see what can be done to-morrow. There are several ponies in the corral that will do."

"Just the same," put in Teddy grimly, "if I ever get my hands on those waddies, I'll——"

Just what he would do was never stated, for he was interrupted by a sudden screech. Bug Eye was trying to start his motor with a view of showing off before the crowd. And a show it was.

The car that he had built out of parts of several different machines, acted like a bucking bronco. With a

groan and a wheeze it started to back. And back it did—up three of the ranch-house steps, then off again into the crowd of punchers.

With a whoop they scattered and began to yell.

“Go it, Bug Eye! Tame the brute! Don’t let the buckner get the best of you! Whoopee, old-timer! You’d sure win a rodeo with that nag!”

Bug Eye, his hat off and his eyes popping, was struggling with the levers.

With a shriek and a clatter the car sprang forward. Straight down the ranch yard it went, followed by a yelling, laughing crowd of punchers.

“Hey there, Bug Eye,” shouted Teddy excitedly. “Look out for that post. We can’t afford——”

The warning came too late. The car struck a line post a glancing blow, and it fell with a crash, snapped off at the bottom. Bug Eye’s chariot tipped, hesitated a moment as if it was about to turn turtle, then righted itself and crashed into the corral fence.

The cowboys were laughing and shouting.

“That waddy is goin’ to get hisself in trouble one of these days with his ol’ chariot if he ain’t careful,” grinned Pat Carey. “Hey, Bug Eye, stop the thing, can’t you, before you do any more damage? Turn around and go home, we’ll show you the way.”

Bug Eye cast him a scornful glance over his shoulder.

“No sircce,” he answered. “I don’t go home until I get the wildcat tamed. Stop here! Couldn’t if I wanted to, the way she’s r’aring. Hey, chariot!”

Bug Eye gave the wheel a sudden turn, but the car, liking to act contrarywise, started to go in the opposite direction. It skidded on two wheels, darted suddenly towards the crowd of punchers, who scattered quickly, and just as it reached the ranch-house again, came to a stop.

Bug Eye, red in the face and perspiring, threw up his hands.

"Now she's sot. I'll be lucky if I get her goin' again to-night," and Bug Eye slumped down on the seat, the picture of despair.

Belle Ada, her face red from laughing, came running down the steps.

"Bug Eye," she pleaded, "the girls are coming over here to-night—Nell and Ethel. Won't you please go after them and bring them back?"

Bug Eye shook his head ruefully.

"Not me. First place, they wouldn't ride in the ol' chariot. Told me so the other night. They're scareder o' this ol' boat than they were the first time they rode a bronc. If I ever get home, though, I'll tell 'em you're expectin' 'em," and Bug Eye jumped out and began to crank the car.

"Bug Eye, look out!" shrieked Belle Ada, dancing up and down in her excitement. "Your clutch is in."

At that moment the chariot decided to take matters in its own hands. With a snort, it pushed Bug Eye roughly out of the way, streaked down the roadway, and started to climb the corral fence. There it hung, groaning and wheezing, and it took the combined efforts of several of the punchers to get it down. When once on four wheels again it resolutely refused to budge an inch.

"We'll tow you in," laughed Pat, as he made a rope fast to the recalcitrant chariot. "Come on, boys! The great and only Bug Eye, the world's wonder cow-puncher. He's tamed his fiery steed so tame she eats out of his hand."

"Yi, yi, yi, yi!" shouted the delighted punchers, and the procession started, Bug Eye in the chariot at the wheel to guide it. Pat Carey, with one end of a rope attached to his saddle and the other to the chariot, led off, with the others circling around Bug Eye, on their ponies, chaffing him and laughing at him.

"Bug Eye," shrieked Belle Ada, as the cavalcade swung into the road, "don't forget to tell Curly——"

But her voice was lost in the "yi, yi, yi, yi!" of the punchers as they disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Chapter V

THE GIRLS COME

The girls who were coming to X Bar X, to visit Belle Ada Manley were Nell Willis and Ethel Carew, the latter called "Curly" by the boys because of her curly, golden hair. They were two nieces of Mrs. Ball, of the 8 X 8 ranch, and had come from New York some months previous for a two weeks' stay.

Their sojourn, however, had extended many months. Teddy teasingly said it was because Nell did not want to leave Roy. And Roy came back at him that "Curly" was so taken with his brother's manly ways that she couldn't bear to tear herself away.

City bred, the two girls were enchanted by the life on the plains, and the spirit of the West had gotten into their blood, and they were loth to depart.

Belle Ada, the dark-haired, dark-eyed daughter of the Manleys, gave a shout of joy and scampered down the ranch-house steps, as the two riders appeared in view.

"There they come!" she cried in glee. "They're racing, and Curly's going to win without a doubt."

"Bet you a ginger cookie she doesn't!" retorted Roy. "Nell's the better rider. Why, Curly isn't one, two, three with——"

"Pooh!" and Belle Ada shook her dark head. "What would I bet a ginger cookie for when I can have all I want from the pantry, foolish? It's just because you think that Nell's the only thing on earth. Curly's going to win, hands down."

Roy's face took on the hue of the setting sun, and he laughed sheepishly.

"I'll be a ring-tailed dodo bird," chimed in Teddy excitedly, "if Curly doesn't win. There, didn't I tell

you?" as Ethel Carew, with a little spurt that sent the dust flying, dashed up a full two lengths ahead of her friend.

"Help her down, Teddy," said Belle Ada mischievously. "She might fall. But don't put a cinch strap on her."

"Fall!" responded Ethel indignantly, as she sprang from the back of her pony with a graceful leap. "Guess I know how to get off a horse as well as you do, Belle Ada Manley." Then as she noticed Teddy's bandaged head, her eyes grew worried.

"Teddy! You're hurt! Bug Eye told us about it. We met him down the road being towed in by the boys. Oh, Teddy, is it very bad? Does it hurt much?"

Teddy grinned. He liked being made a fuss over, especially by Curly Carew. He was about to disclaim any injury; then thought better of it. It was pleasant to get a little sympathy, especially when a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl was dispensing it.

"All in a day's work, Curly," he said loftily. "Might be a great deal worse. A waddy didn't like my particular style of beauty, so he creased my forehead. That's why I've got my head in a sling. It's nothing, Curly," he added, as the girl looked doubtful, then blushed as he saw her eyes were wet.

"Say, don't I get any sympathy?" cried Roy, trying to turn the conversation his way, and smiling at Nell. "I haven't got any red marks on me like Teddy's, but if that waddy had been a better shot, I might have," and he showed the sleeve of his coat with the bullet hole in it.

"Oh, Roy! He shot at you, too? The bullet went through your sleeve!"

"Yes. Marks of the great war of Mica Mountain. But a miss is as good as a mile, Nell. He didn't hit me, and that's all there is to it. Mom will sew up the sleeve and it will be as good as new."

"And you lost Star and Flash, too!" Nell's voice had a

little quaver in it. She was fond of those particular ponies, and it distressed her that they were gone.

"Ahem." Belle Ada was trying to attract attention, but no one was looking at her.

"Perhaps," she went on, in a louder voice, "you will remember that you came over to the X Bar X to see me, and I'm still here? Or was it the boys you came to see? Mom's here, too, girls, you might notice when you have the time."

The girls ran up the steps, completely ignoring Belle Ada, and threw their arms around the pretty blue-eyed, golden-haired woman who was waiting on the veranda and gave her a bear-like hug.

Mrs. Manley, often called by her husband and sons the "blonde angel of the West", was beloved by all who knew her. She had become endeared to the two girls the first time they met her, and her combination of strength and sweetness had won their admiration.

"Dad's here, too, I might say if you haven't noticed it," sang out Teddy. "Curly won the race," he went on, as Mr. Manley came out on the veranda, smiling. "I was going to be a ring-tailed dodo bird if she hadn't, so of course——"

"Pity she didn't lose," teased Roy. "Then we'd have had a new specimen at the X Bar X. With Bug Eye and his chariot we could start a circus."

Teddy grinned. Then his eyes grew troubled.

"It was bad enough, girls, for us to lose our watches and rings and money and Star and Flash. But the loss of father's package is the worst."

"Tut, tut, boys." Mr. Manley in his bluff way tried to assure them that he was not worried, but his attempt was somewhat of a failure.

"I'll bet it's the same crowd that ran away with us to Sholo Caves," and Nell Willis's eyes flashed fire. "The boys got the rustlers that time, and they will again." Nell's voice was full of conviction.

Mr. Manley shook his head.

"No," he said. "It's another gang entirely. But let's not worry about it any more just now. Here's Nora calling us to supper. Me for the ginger cookie that Belle Ada turned up her nose at."

"I didn't," protested Belle Ada. "I said it was foolish to bet something that I could have anyway."

Roy and Teddy wanted to have the two visitors sit one by each of them at the table, but, with a sudden shyness, did not ask it. Belle Ada, however, laughingly arranged it.

"Here, Curly, you sit by Teddy. He's an invalid now, and you'll have to feed him."

"Invalid! Not so's you'd know it!" Teddy protested in disgust. "Just because I've got my head in a sling isn't any reason I can't feed myself. But, of course, if you insist, Belle Ada," and Teddy drew back Curly's chair and placed her in it beside him at the table.

"Roy," Belle Ada's eyes were full of mischief, "because you got a bullet hole in your coat won't stop you from eating, I guess. Unless looking at Nell takes away your appetite, 'Drink to me only with thine eyes,'" and Belle Ada danced away laughing.

"Now, Belle Ada, lay off. Think you're smart, don't you?" Roy's face was as red as a turkey gobbler's comb. Much as he liked Nell Willis, he did not want the fact advertised. Nell, too, under Belle Ada's searching eyes, flushed.

"You're a ninny, Belle Ada," she declared. "Some day there'll be a good-looking doctor come along and you'll fall for him so hard it will shake the earth. Then we'll have the laugh on you. My, wouldn't I like to be here when you do! Fun!" and Nell laughed merrily.

"Here's Nora with a dish of stew," interrupted Mr. Manley. "Now get busy, everybody," and he drew his chair to the table and put the ladle into the steaming dish.

Although the boys and their visitors made merry and Mr. Manley joined in, Roy gave his father a searching glance from time to time, and could tell that the owner of the X Bar X was really considerably worried. Not alone the loss of the important papers and the boys' ponies was the cause, Roy was sure. There was something back of it all, he was certain, that his father had not told him.

Roy had always been his father's confidant. They were more like pals than father and son. The night should not pass, Roy determined, before he had talked with his father and learned just what was troubling him.

After supper was over and Roy and Teddy had taken the girls to the corral to look at some ponies from which the boys were to pick their new mounts, Mr. Manley went out on the veranda and lighted his corn-cob pipe. There was a worried look in his eyes, and his mouth was set sternly. Always when Bardwell Manley was perplexed, those lines around his mouth were set grimly.

He had not been there long when there was a rustle behind him, and the "little blonde angel of the West" perched on the arm of his chair.

"Bardwell, tell me." Her hand caressed his dark hair that was beginning to be shot with grey. "What does it all mean?"

Mr. Manley drew his wife down on his knee and placed an arm lovingly around her shoulders.

"I don't know, Barbara," he said seriously. "There's something back of it all that I can't fathom yet. But I'm afraid there's going to be a rustlers' raid again. That fellow, Harvard Hooley, from what I can learn, is an educated man. He's got brains. And brains with a lot of cow-rustling punchers can make us a lot of trouble."

Mrs. Manley continued to smooth her husband's hair.

"I hate to have you start in again," she said wistfully. "I don't want you and the boys to be in constant danger, as you have been before. And the girls must be guarded,

too. You'll be careful, won't you, Bardwell? It is better to lose a few cattle than our boys."

Mr. Manley kissed his wife's forehead.

"Don't worry," and his voice was tender. "I've beat them before and I will again. Only this time we're going to be up against a different matter, I'm afraid. Brains and brawn. They're hard to beat. Come, Barbara, there are the boys and Nell and Curly. We'll turn on the phonograph and try to be gay. Don't let them see we are worried."

That evening Roy did not get a chance to talk to his father in private, as Mr. Manley did not want to discuss the matter until he had time to think it over thoroughly. So, at last, as the boys were tired they went to their room.

Teddy, always in a hurry, undressed first and got into bed. Roy, however, after turning out the light, went to the window, and stood looking out into the night.

It was bright moonlight. The roofs of the ranch buildings shone white, while their outlines were dark shadows against a field of silver.

Suddenly, as Roy stood there, from the mountainside came the screech of an owl. Three times it hooted. Then stopped. Then came the weird cry twice.

"Hear that?" Roy spoke eagerly. "That's no owl, I'll tell a maverick. It's a signal. Did you hear it, Ted?"

"No. What?" a sleepy voice came from the pillows. "I didn't hear anything. Your imagination, Roy."

"It was a signal."

Roy was positive, but as the hoot did not come again immediately, he reluctantly climbed into bed. He would not have been so contented, however, had he been able to see, on the mountainside, beneath a clump of silver birches, a tall, dark man with his hand against his mouth ready to give again that screech-owl cry.

Chapter VI

THE EXCURSION TO EAGLES

The next morning the X Bar X boys were up early, and Roy began to talk at once about what he had heard the night before.

"That wasn't an owl, I'm quite sure," he said to Teddy, as the two were dressing. "No owl would screech like that—three times and then twice."

"Pooh." Teddy liked to disagree with his elder brother once in a while. Not because he did not believe him, but just to show that he had ideas of his own.

"Those owls hoot any old way. Remember that big white one we shot last year? The old bird used to hoot six times in a row. That was an owl all right, last night."

Roy shook his head.

"Don't believe it. It was some signal. Wish I had gone out and found what it was all about."

"And got potted, perhaps, by our educated friend. Nell has made you lose your head. Now look at me, I'm just as cool^as——"

"You cool? Not much. The way you flush up when Curly talks to you would make a porcupine laugh. You ought to snap out of it, Ted. Don't let——"

A chatter of girlish voices from the veranda below interrupted.

"That's the girls." Roy's voice was eager. "They beat us up. Race you to see who gets dressed first, Ted."

"Whoopee!" Nell Willis's clear soprano shrilled loudly.

"Going to sleep all day? It's most noon, lazy bones."

"Coming." Roy was buckling his belt. "Teddy's the slow poke."

"I'm not, either. I'll be there in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

Roy cleared the stairs in two bounds, with Teddy at his heels. The two visitors, with Belle Ada, were waiting impatiently, eager for the day's fun to begin.

"Sleepy head!" Ethel gave Teddy a reproachful glance. "We've been up hours and hours. It's most seven o'clock. Whoever heard of anybody at a ranch sleeping that late?"

At the breakfast table Roy proposed an excursion.

"Let's take the girls and Belle Ada for a ride to Eagles," he said.

Eagles was the nearest place on the railroad. It was a small settlement but, whenever the boys and the punchers wanted any diversion, Eagles was the mecca of attraction.

Belle Ada was gleeful.

"Oh, let's! It will be great fun."

"We'll take the car," said Roy. "That will hold us five, and we can go fast."

Nora will put us up a lunch and we'll explore the country beyond the town. There's a great view from the mountain about ten miles farther on," added Teddy.

While the girls were chattering about the proposed trip, Roy drew his father to one side.

"Dad, I heard an owl hoot just as we were going to bed. It didn't seem real. Sounded to me like a signal—three times and then twice. I'm sure it wasn't an owl."

Mr. Manley nodded. "I heard it, too, and I went out to see what it was."

Roy's eyes grew big. "You did? And you didn't call me?"

"Didn't want to, son. I went up the trail on the hillside, and I saw——"

"A man? Oh, dad, I wish I had been there."

"Just caught a glimpse of him in the darkness. Saw him put his hand to his mouth and give that owl call again. Then he disappeared and I came back."

"Perhaps we hadn't better go to Eagles this morning."

Roy's eyes grew serious. "There's something up! What does it mean?"

"Don't know. There's something in the wind. But you go with the girls. Perhaps you can learn some news. Keep your eyes and ears open."

"You bet I will!" and Roy went to the garage to get out the car.

The ride to Eagles, about twelve miles, was uneventful. The day was a perfect one. Only such a day as can be found in the West. The bright, blue sky was without a cloud, and the gentle wind from the south was just brisk enough to temper the heat of the sun.

All of the young people were in high spirits, Teddy especially so. He had discarded the "sling" with which his head had been wrapped, and a strip of court-plaster was the only sign of the escapade of the day before.

Two miles outside of Eagles, Ethel gave a shrill cry.

"Oh, look! What's that coming?"

Far down the road could be seen a car that was careening from side to side, kicking up great spurts of dust as it ploughed along.

Roy grinned. "Bug Eye, the one and only. Guess I'd better get out of his way," and he drew the car to one side of the road.

"Hey, Bug Eye!" he shouted, as the car came up. "Stop! I want to talk to you."

With a snort, a groan, and a wheeze, the mismated vehicle finally came to a halt. Bug Eye regarded the "chariot" ruefully.

"Sure, I'll stop," he said. "But I don't know how I'll ever get the confounded thing goin' again. She's actin' up to-day like all possessed. What's the news?"

Roy told him briefly of the owl call, and Bug Eye was profoundly impressed.

"'Twas a signal, sure. Bet it wasn't any one but that rascal Harvard Hooley. Like to get my hands on him for a minute! I'd fix him! I'll put Mr. Ball wise when I get

back to the 8 X 8. Must be gettin' along, if the old boat can set sail."

The boys drove on and, looking back, they could see Bug-Eye's chariot kicking up great clouds of dust, but seemingly immovable.

As they drove down the main street of Eagles, a glaring sign greeted their eyes:

The Cowboy's Revenge

"Oh, look!" and Ethel clutched Teddy's arm. "Let's go to the movies. That ought to be good."

"Huh! What do you mean, go to the movies, Curly?"

"Spoke plainly, didn't I?"

"This is morning, young lady. The movies don't show until afternoon."

"Yeah? Great town you have here! In New York they open early."

"New York!" and Teddy roared with laughter. "There are a few more people in New York to visit the movies than in Eagles, Curly."

"Drive on, Roy." Nell did not want Teddy's teasing of Ethel to go further.

"Sure. We'll go to Red Peak. You girls have never been there. We can eat our lunch on top." Roy pressed his foot on the accelerator and the car sped forward.

"That's Red Peak," he explained, as they came in sight of a high hill a few miles beyond Eagles. "See that clump of red oaks at the top? That's how it gets its name."

The girls were much impressed by the tall trees with their dark red leaves.

"Gorgeous!" Nell Willis's eyes shone. She was a great lover of nature, and had never seen a red oak before.

"Oh, Teddy!" Ethel was equally enthusiastic. "Can we climb to the top? We can't go with the car, can we?"

"Sure." Teddy was grinning. "We'll ride right up that narrow path and over the trees."

"Foolish!" Ethel shook her yellow curls. "I know better than that." Then, as Roy stopped the car, the five jumped out.

"We'll leave the car here," said Roy, "and climb to the top. Come on, all of you."

The girls began to run up the steep incline, but soon tired and started to climb sensibly.

It was nearly five o'clock before the boys and their companions could bring themselves to leave the gorgeous clump of red oaks at the top of the peak.

As they drove through the main street of the town, Roy drew the car alongside the kerb.

"Let's go in here," he said, pointing to a gaily decorated pavilion, "and get some ice-cream."

Teddy gave his brother a quick, searching look. Strangely enough, Roy did not care particularly for ice-cream. There was something behind his desire to go into that pavilion, Teddy was quite sure.

Inside, there were several groups seated at the various tables. In one corner a number of cowboys were talking excitedly. As soon as the girls had finished their cream, one of the punchers motioned Roy and Teddy to join them.

"Heard the news?" a tall, angular rancher asked.

"No. What is it?"

"The rustlers are at it again. They drove off fifty head from the Double-O ranch last night."

Roy's eyes snapped. "Know who they are?" he asked eagerly!

"Not sure; but it's a new crowd, we think. We've seen several strangers in town. The leader of the gang is a tall, educated man, it seems."

"It's Harvard Hooley!" exclaimed Teddy excitedly. Then he told the punchers his and Roy's experience of the previous day.

"It's him, sure," assented Roy. "I'd like to get my hands on the rascal."

"You bet!" echoed Teddy.

That night the X Bar X boys again heard the call of the screech owl. Two times it came; twice again; then twice more, as high up on the hillside the educated rustler was giving the signal to his mates.

Chapter VII

MORE EXCITING TIMES

The loss of Star and Flash, the boys' favourite ponies, troubled them very much. The ponies had been brought up at the X Bar X ranch from birth, and, as Teddy expressed it, had become part of the family. There were plenty of other broncos in the corral, and Mr. Manley told the boys to take their pick.

Roy had chosen a roan pony that he called "Gyp" while Teddy had picked a coal-black one that boasted of the name of "Beauty". These broncos had only recently been broken, but both of the boys were expert riders and expected no trouble in handling their new mounts.

The morning after the trip to Eagles was another bright, sunshiny day, and the girls were eager for more fun. Used to city life, they were energetic and full of vigour, and were always ready for a frolic.

"What's on for to-day?" Curly asked, as they gathered on the veranda after an early breakfast. "You know we have to go back to the 8 X 8 to-night. We don't want to let any time go to waste."

"Don't know. Suggest something." Teddy was always ready for anything that might be proposed.

"Might go hunting. We haven't been for a long time," Belle Ada suggested.

"Fine!" Roy agreed instantly. He had been aching to get out in the woods in the hope that he might discover something of the raiders. "We'll get Nora to put us up a

lunch, so we won't have to hurry back. And maybe—just maybe—we might run across our educated friend from Harvard."

"Hope so. And if we do——" Teddy was burning to be avenged because of the indignities that they had suffered.

"Is it safe?" Ethel was ordinarily a courageous girl, but she had become a little timid since her experience with the rustlers in the Sholo Caves.

"Of course; with the boys along I'd like to get a shot at that fellow myself, just to pay him good for taking Star and Flash," and Nell made a fierce-looking face.

"The gun-lady from New York!" Teddy liked to tease. "She eats 'em alive. I bet down in the city the bad men are all afraid of you. Reckon they call you 'Nell the Terrible Gun Girl'."

"Never saw a gun in my life before I came out here," asserted Nell. "Just the same, I can shoot most as good as you can, Teddy Manley."

"Sure. You can hit the side of a barn all right, if it isn't too far," Teddy teased. "We'll have a shooting match when we get on the mountain. Come on, you mighty hunters, let's get our broncos."

Fifteen minutes later, Belle Ada, the boys with their new mounts, and the visiting girls riding the broncos they had used ever since they came to the 8 X 8 ranch, started on a brisk trot on the side of the Mica Mountain.

A mile up the trail Ethel caught a glimpse of some blackberry bushes at the other end of the short detour. The last of the riders in line, she said nothing, but pulled the rein sharply and the pony swerved to the right. Urging him on, so as not to fall too far behind the others, the girl bent over the bronco's neck and watched the little spurts of dust fly up as the pony pounded over the dry earth.

When she had eaten her fill of the big, juicy berries, Ethel started to return.

It was not for several minutes that the others noticed that Ethel Carew was missing. Teddy, of course, discovered it first.

"Where's Curly? She isn't here."

"Don't worry." Roy liked to speak patronisingly to his younger brother. "Maybe she's run off with the educated rustler."

Teddy's jaw was set hard.

"Curly! Curly!" he shouted. "Yoo-hoo! Where are you, Curly Carew?"

All listened eagerly for an answer, but none came. There was no sound except the sighing of the trees, and the low murmur of Rocky Run River, a stream that skirted both the X Bar X and the 8 X 8 ranches.

Then, suddenly, from somewhere on the mountain-side, there came the hoot of an owl. Three times it sounded. Then twice. Silence.

Belle Ada's eyes grew wide with terror.

"Oh, boys," she gasped, between little catches of breath, "they've got her! The rustlers! We must do something! Quick!"

Teddy's face went white.

"It's Hooley," he said in a low tone, and there was a grimness in his voice that made the others wonder. "He's got her. I'm going," and turning his pony he lashed it on the flank and dashed madly down the trail.

"Snap out of it, Ted," Roy shouted. "You'll be thrown, or break Beauty's leg if you ride down the trail like that. We're coming, of course, but be sensible."

Teddy, however, was out of sight before Roy had finished. Beauty, his eyes white with fright at the sudden lashing to which he was not accustomed, was leaping like some wild animal. If Teddy had not been a fearless rider he would have lost his seat, but he swayed with the horse as if he had been part of the animal. Riding Flash, with a landslide at his heels, had given him an experience which now stood him in good stead.

Bardwell Manley had often said that Teddy had "been born aboard a bronc". If he had not been he must surely have been flung to the ground in that mad ride and seriously injured, if not killed.

Again came that screech-owl signal. Teddy gritted his teeth and drew rein to listen.

"Oh, God," he prayed, "be my friend as well as my mother's. Don't let him get her. Save Curly, little Curly from——"

The prayer was not finished, for just then, from far to the right, came the sound of shots.

Three of them in quick succession. Three more slowly. Then three again quickly.

Teddy's eyes shone. He knew what it meant. Some one, Ethel probably, was trying to give the code signal. Three dots, three dashes, three dots. It was the SOS call for help.

Without trying to answer in like manner, Teddy fired shot after shot until the chambers of his pistol were empty. Then he turned his pony up the narrow defile from which the shots seemed to come.

"Curly!" he shouted. "Yoo-hoo! Curly!"

"Yoo-hoo!" The answer came faintly, yet clearly. It was Ethel Carew's voice, and Teddy was glad.

Urging Beauty as fast as possible under the low-hanging branches and over the rough stones that made the bronco slip and almost fall, and repeating his yoo-hoo call, Teddy at last came in sight of a little figure, sitting upon a rock, calmly loading shells into her rifle.

"Curly! Oh, but I'm thankful that you're alive!"

"Oh, Teddy, I knew you'd come. I took a wrong turning and got lost and couldn't find my way back."

"He didn't hurt you? You didn't see him at all?"

Ethel understood.

"Not close by. He was on that peak there," and the girl pointed to a hill some distance across a small ravine. "He was over there. I could see him plainly, but he

didn't see me. A tall, dark man. He made that screech-owl call. Then he disappeared. I remembered the SOS signal and tried to give it with the shots. Oh, Teddy, I knew you'd find me," and Curly Carew's eyes became moist.

"Of course." Teddy put his arm around the girl's waist and lifted her to her feet. "We must go back," he said, trying to speak in a matter-of-fact way. "The others are looking for us. I reckon they heard the shots."

Silently, the two rode down the trail until they came to the broader one. At the junction, there was a babel of voices, as they came upon the rest of the party.

Belle Ada and Nell threw themselves upon Ethel and hugged and kissed her, while Roy and Teddy looked as if they would have liked to do the same.

"Good boy, Teddy, I'll tell a maverick!" Roy put his arm around his brother's shoulders. "I knew you'd make the grade, though I was awfully afraid for you when you dashed away as you did."

"Wasn't anything," Teddy asserted stoutly. "Beauty's a dandy bronc. Seemed to know we had to get there quickly. He's sure-footed, too," and he patted the horse's neck affectionately.

It was long past noon when the young hunters reached an open space near the top of Mica Mountain, where they ate their lunch. The scare about Ethel had put a damper on their spirits, and they were not inclined to go farther.

"Fine lot of hunters we are!" remarked Roy disgustedly. "We haven't had a shot at anything. I don't think, though, it would be wise to shoot now. If Harvard Hooley is around, as Curly thinks, he might have a big gang with him and pounce down on us. I think we had better go back to the X Bar X and tell father about it. Who says yes?"

"Right-o!" For once Teddy readily agreed with his brother, and the girls assented to the plan. Slowly, and

holding their broncos in check, so that they might not stumble going down the steep incline, the party started, keeping close watch on either side for signs of a possible enemy.

Once Roy was quite sure that he saw the figure of a man outlined against the sky on a narrow ledge of rocks, but as he came nearer it proved to be only a misshapen tree.

Ethel, too, a little shaken by her experience, could see weird shapes on every side, and cried out, startled, as a fox scuttled across the trail and was lost in the undergrowth.

Nearly down the mountain, Roy suddenly stopped and pointed to the trail ahead.

"Look there!" he exclaimed. "See that rabbit!" pointing to a little bunny that sat motionless just before them. Its eyes were staring straight ahead, and in them shone a great fear. The rabbit was rigid. Not a muscle moved. It seemed as if turned to stone.

Roy raised his rifle to his shoulder.

"Don't shoot, Roy!" shrieked Belle Ada. "The poor little thing. It would be a shame to kill it."

"No, no, Roy!" chimed in Nell. "Let the bunny live. It would be a shame to——"

Crack! Roy's rifle spoke. The rabbit's eyes suddenly lost their look of fear. Its muscles twitched convulsively. Then, with a swift bound, it leaped into the air, scuttled into the bushes, and was gone.

Down the hillside, into the trail to the spot where the rabbit had been but a moment before, rolled the largest rattler the boys had ever seen. Its head had been severed just below the fangs by Roy's well-aimed shot.

"Got him! How was that for a shot?" and Roy sprang to the ground.

Then something unexpected happened. From the bushes appeared more rattlers. Scores of them, it seemed to the horrified young people, angry and hissing, raising

their heads and darting out their tongues in rage at being disturbed. Straight across the trail they moved, as if in battle formation, and the ominous rattle, that note of warning when the snake is about to strike, sounded loudly in the stillness of the forest.

Chapter VIII

THE RUSTLERS' RAID

At the onslaught of the rattlesnakes there was great confusion. The girls shrieked wildly, the broncos plunged and reared and their eyes shone white with fear at their enemy. Roy, who was on the ground, got mixed up with the frightened ponies and was in danger of being trampled.

Nell's mount suddenly slipped on the smooth carpet of pine needles and fell to his knees, and Nell, taken unawares, was thrown over the bronco's head. She landed on the trail just beyond the squirming mass of snakes.

Unhurt by her fall except for a few scratches, with rare presence of mind, the girl rolled over and over down the trail. She then picked herself up and climbed a tree to a low hanging branch out of harm's way.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Roy's rifle spoke and three of the rattlers lay squirming in the dust.

Crack! Crack! Teddy was as good a shot as his brother and two more of the serpents writhed for a moment and then lay still.

"We fixed them!" shouted Roy "Come on down, Nell. It's all right. We've killed them."

"Not on your life!" Nell was not going to take any chances. She thought that snakes could not climb trees and that her perch was a place of safety.

"Not until you've got them all, Roy Manley. Why, there are hundreds of them! I saw them myself. Ugh!"

and Nell put her hands before her eyes, nearly fell off the branch, and edged along to the trunk of the tree which she clasped with both arms.

Despite the sudden scare, Roy could not help grinning.

"There weren't hundreds, Nell. It's all your imagination. There were only six. I counted them. We must have disturbed a nest when I shot that one who charmed the rabbit.

But Nell was obdurate.

"Here I am, and here I'll stay," she said firmly, "until you look around and make certain there are no more."

Belle Ada and Ethel were laughing, Ethel a bit hysterically. Although they had been greatly frightened, they could see the funny side of the adventure.

"Quickest move you ever made in your life, Nell," gasped Belle Ada, between her laughs. "Gee, but you skinned up that tree like a kitten with a dog after it. If you knew how funny you look you'd come down right away. Don't be afraid. There are no more rattlers."

"Don't care if I do look funny. Can't any snakes get me up here. Nell Willis would rather be safe than sorry."

"Don't stay perched up there all day," admonished Ethel. "Only don't come down head first like our tabby does at the 8 X 8."

Nell looked suspiciously at the trail. But as Roy had thrown the dead rattlers into the undergrowth where she could not see them she at last climbed down.

"Gee, but I was never so scared in my life!" exclaimed Belle Ada, as Nell landed on her feet. "Weren't you just scared to death when that bronc threw you, Nell?"

"Certainly not." Nell wrinkled her nose with a superior air. "I——"

"Oh, no," teased Teddy. "That's the way you always get off your horse, isn't it, fair lady?"

"Just to show of what stuff you are made, I'll race you to that white birch tree down there," he laughed, when the party, on their way once again, came to a more level place in the trail.

With a flourish, Nell and Teddy were off. Teddy let her head him for three-quarters of the way, then spurred up Beauty, dashed by Nell, and finished two lengths ahead.

As the party rode down the widening trail, both Nell and Ethel seemed nervous and kept looking from side to side to see if they could discover any possible danger. Belle Ada, however, saw only the funny side, and chattered incessantly.

"Snap out of it, Nell." Roy noticed her anxious glances. "What do you think you're going to see now? Looking for a bear? Or maybe you think a tiger might pounce out on us?"

Nell wrinkled her nose disdainfully.

"Don't try to be funny. It doesn't become you. I'm going to keep my eyes peeled, and if I see anything suspicious I'll——"

Nell suddenly reined up her bronco, and, as she was riding ahead, caused the rest to come to a halt.

"What's that funny-looking thing under the branch of that tree?" she asked, pointing to a white birch that was some distance ahead.

"Don't see anything." Teddy peered in the direction indicated. "Isn't a thing but a lot of leaves. You're seeing things, Nell."

"Am not, either." Nell was positive. "You can't see anything but Curly these days." Nell raised her rifle, pointed it at the branch at which she had been looking, and fired.

The bullet tore through the "funny-looking thing" and bit into the tree.

Buzz! Buzz! *Buzz-z-z!*

Roy urged his pony forward.

"Ride like sixty, everybody!" he shouted. "Nell's hit a hornets' nest! They'll be after us in a minute! They're yellow jackets, and when they get mad—whoopel!"

The others started, but Nell, still curious, lingered.

"Aren't they funny-looking?" as the yellow jackets began to come out of the nest, which had been ripped apart, in an angry swarm. "Will they bite?"

"Sting! Say, if they ever get on you, you'll have to be plastered over with mud for a week! Hurry! Don't wait a minute."

The hornets had not yet discovered the cause of their discomfiture, but buzzed around their nest, which hung by a thin thread. Then one of them, seeing the intruders, made a sudden dart and landed on Nell's arm. Before it could sting, however, Roy had given it a slap and knocked it to the ground.

"Oh, Roy, don't be so rough!" Nell rubbed her arm where Roy had hit it.

"Here they come!" shouted Teddy, as the yellow jackets swarmed from the nest in a cloud. "Beat it, everybody, quick!"

This time the girls heeded the warning and soon had left the angry cloud of hornets behind.

When the party reached the X Bar X, they found the cowboys and punchers in a state of great excitement. The centre of all eyes was Bug Eye, who had driven over from the 8 X 8 in his famous chariot.

"Them fellows have run off with some of Mr. Ball's best cattle," he explained to the boys, who were eager for the news. "Mr. Ball thinks this is a new crowd of rustlers that's workin' here."

"Harvard Hooley, I'll bet!" Roy's eyes gleamed. "He's a rascal who'd do anything."

"That's him!" Bug Eye exclaimed excitedly. He was a grotesque figure, dancing on one foot and then on the other. "That educated rustler's at the bottom of it, as sure as little apples are green!"

"Tell us about it. We haven't heard."

"It was this afternoon," went on Bug Eye, going over and turning a valve in the chariot and trying to stop the engine that was still running wheezily. "We went out to the east range to round up some steers, the best ones we had at the 8 X 8. There should have been two hundred in the bunch, but fifty of them were gone. We could see from their tracks that they had been cut out of the herd. They run them along the ridge."

"How did they get there? Fences down?"

"The wires were cut for about a hundred yards. Good clean work—headwork, you bet. Them rustlers had begun to mend the fence again, but they must have been scared off and left in a hurry."

Roy looked at his father and saw the firm, grim lines around his mouth that always came there when he was disturbed.

"Looks as if we were in for it again, son," he said, in response to Roy's questioning glance. "It will have to be a fight to the finish this time, I'm afraid. We can't afford to let this thing go on year after year. We must stop it once for all. Are you with us?"

Both Teddy and Roy cast reproachful glances at their father.

"Of course we are! How could you ask?"

Despite his worry at the situation, Mr. Manley smiled.

"I knew you would be. It may be a long, hard fight, but we'll win in the end. Your mother's worried, boys," as Mrs. Manley came out on the veranda. "We must make as light of it as possible before her."

Mrs. Manley came down the steps and linked her arm in that of her husband.

"I know what it means, Bardwell," she said gravely. "You have got to do your duty. But you won't take any unnecessary risks, will you? Promise me."

"I promise, Barbara. With Peter Ball's crowd and our crowd it should not be very dangerous. But we must

work together and match our brains against the rustlers'. I am convinced the leader is Harvard Hooley, as they call him. He's the man we have to beat."

"Mr. Ball and the punchers from the 8 X 8 are on their way now to round them up," broke in Bug Eye excitedly. "They'll be here in two shakes of a lamb's tail. He sent me over to ask the X Bar,X to join them."

"Sure. We'll be there with bells on," Roy answered instantly.

"Of course." Teddy was as enthusiastic as his brother. "I'd sure like to get my hands on that rascal, and when I do——"

Nick Looker and the other punchers who had been listening were cager for the fray. Bug Eye alone was sorrowful.

"I've got to go back to the ranch," he announced mournfully, "and take the girls back. Mrs. Ball told me to, so if you don't mind, young ladies, will you be seated in the chariot?"

Nell and Ethel hurriedly made ready, then kissed Belle Ada and Mrs. Manley, and climbed into Bug Eye's car.

Bug Eye began to pull levers and stepped on the accelerator, and for a wonder the "chariot" responded with a start that nearly threw the three from their seats.

"She's goin'!" shouted Bug Eye, in glee. "I knew I'd tame her some time. Reckon she'll keep up the pace till we get to the 8 X 8 if we don't linger."

"Good-bye, good-bye!" shouted the girls, as the car gained speed.

The cowboys gathered around Mr. Manley for instructions. A minute had not passed before, from the mountainside, came the faint hoot of an owl. Three times it sounded as the men listened, then twice. The owl call of the rustlers.

Mr. Manley's face grew dark as he heard the signal.

"They're overdoing it," he said grimly. "They ought

to know that owls don't hoot at this time of day. I wish we could get their code."

"We will." Teddy was positive. "And when we do——" He broke off abruptly as a cloud of dust was seen in the distance.

"There they are!" he shouted excitedly. "Mr. Ball and the punchers! Now the war begins!"

Chapter IX

START OF THE RUSTLERS' WAR

Riding furiously, as if the despised rustlers were just ahead and would be captured the next few minutes, the men from the 8 X 8 ranch came up, the broncos kicking up the dust in great spurts of grey.

Mr. Ball was the first to dismount, and sprang up the steps of the veranda, down which Mr. Manley hurried with extended hand.

"Bardwell," Peter Ball's voice quavered for an instant as he took his friend's hand, "we've got to pull together in this. Fifty of my best cattle have been cut out of the herd by the rustlers. We know in which direction they went and we're going in pursuit. I knew you'd want to help us out, so I sent Bug Eye over to tell you."

"Of course." Mr. Manley still grasped Peter Ball's hand. "I'm with you to the finish, and so are my men. You can count on our sticking until the rustlers are dispersed and brought to justice."

"Whoopee-e-e!" The men of both ranches cheered lustily and gathered around the ranch owners.

"Boys," Mr. Manley began, his dark eyes alight and fiery, "I can't make much of a speech—you've heard me try to before—and, anyway, I don't feel in the mood for talkin' to-night. We're with you to the bitter end. I'm goin', and Roy and Teddy. We're going to take Pop Burns along, and Gus Tripp, Nat Raymond, Nick

Looker, and a new man who came lately, Cass Cooper. He's a dead shot and eager for a fight. I wish we could take every man, but that wouldn't be wise. We've got to leave some to look after the X Bar X, for there may be a raid here."

He was interrupted by a series of shrill yells. The punchers liked Mr. Manley and knew that he meant what he said.

"Now, you men get set," he went on. "We're goin' to start right away. There will be rations to last a week if necessary, and every man will wear his cartridge belt and use his gun when necessary. This isn't goin' to be any tea party. We mean business."

Everybody was astir in an instant. Small bags of bacon, flour, beans, and coffee had been prepared. The guns were looked at and the saddles were carefully inspected. At last the party was mounted, with their guns fastened to their saddles. The men only awaited the word to start.

Mr. Manley sprang into the saddle and rode alongside Peter Ball at the head of the cavalcade. "Let's go," he said.

The men started, not boisterously, but in orderly fashion. They knew what it meant. Some of them might not come back. But they were ready for anything that might befall. As they rode off Mrs. Manley and Belle Ada waved their handkerchiefs and tried bravely to keep back their tears.

Peter Ball was not a man to jump at conclusions. Every move that he made was carefully weighed and thought over before action was taken. When the loss of the fifty steers had been reported, Mr. Ball had gone at once to the east range, where he kept his best cattle.

As Bug Eye had said, out of a herd of two hundred animals, fifty were missing. By careful tracing it was found that the missing animals had been driven in a

northerly direction. It was Mr. Ball's firm conviction that the rustlers had a camp, or their headquarters, on Red Rock Mountain.

This mountain was located some distance away beyond Whirlpool River. The river contained a series of rapids, and only a man who was familiar with it would know where a ford could be made. This fact convinced Peter Ball that the leader of the rustlers was Harvard Hooley, a man who had worked at a neighbouring ranch and who had often taken long trips by himself when off duty, exploring the country.

Hooley had explained his wanderings by saying that he was a student of nature and was getting specimens of flora in the West for classification later.

From all accounts, the band of rustlers numbered ten or twelve men. Several who were supposed to belong to the gang had been seen at Eagles recently. They had been guarded in their talk, but enough had been heard to arouse suspicion.

The trail that led to Red Rock Mountain was one of the least travelled of any in that vicinity. There were short, stubby clumps of mesquite grass, which might conceal holes or hidden stones over which a pony might stumble. Caution must be taken to avoid pitfalls and accidents.

As they rode along in the gathering darkness the scene was a picturesque one. The sun threw its slanting rays between the tall trees, making great shadows that resembled weird shapes and forms as a brisk breeze moved the branches to and fro. Not far distant could be heard the roar of Whirlpool River as it rushed over rocks and stones in its swirling path.

As the trail grew narrower the men rode in single file. Peter Ball kept the lead with Mr. Manley next and Roy and Teddy at his heels. Nick Looker rode close to the boys, looking upon them as his special charge. Just before the men started, Mrs. Manley had called Nick

aside and commissioned him to keep close watch over her two sons.

"Nick," she had said, "Roy and Teddy are apt to be venturesome. They're young, and oftentimes they take chances. I'm going to put them in your charge. Don't let them go into any unnecessary danger. I can trust you, Nick."

Nick had bowed low and pressed the little hand of the "blonde angel of the West" in his great horny one.

"You can trust me, ma'am," he had promised earnestly. "I'll keep right by them, and if there's any fighting I'll keep right by their side," and Nick had ridden away impressed with the responsibility that had been put upon him by Mrs. Manley.

An hour went by. The sun had set, but the darkness was slow in coming in that region. It was clear and warm and almost the full of the moon, which would soon be up.

Arriving at the top of a hill, the men paused to reconnoitre and swept the surrounding country with their field glasses. Then, so far in the distance that it could be heard only faintly, came the owl signal.

"Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot!" Silence for a moment. Then again: "Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot." Teddy gritted his teeth hard as he heard it.

"It's a regular code," he told Roy, who had ridden alongside, "and I'm going to get it before we're through. You remember that book on codes that I was reading last winter. It gave a lot of information that I think will help. I've been studying those signals ever since that first night."

"You'll get it, Ted, I'll tell a maverick." Roy had great confidence in his brother's ability. The boy was clever and quick to grasp anything he put his mind on.

"That signal," said Mr. Manley, and his face lighted up again for a moment, "shows that we are on the right track. We probably won't catch up to them to-night, but it's only a matter of time before we do."

"Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot!" Four times only it came that time. Then the great silence of the forest enveloped the riders.

The men had scarcely started again when, from almost overhead, came the call of an owl.

"Hoot!"

Every muscle was tensed, nerves grew taut, rifles and pistols leaped from their holsters.

"Hoot!"

Mr. Manley's hearty laugh broke the tension.

"That's the real thing," he said. "See how different it is from the rustlers' call? There she goes!"

The men caught a glimpse of two staring yellow eyes and heard the flap, flap of wings as the bird sailed away, evidently disturbed by the intruders.

Teddy's boyish laugh rang out in the silence.

"No code to that, except, perhaps, 'I'm going to beat it while the beating's good.' She was a big bird; the biggest one I've ever seen, I think."

"Looks bigger in the dim light," observed Nick Looker, who, according to his promise to Mrs. Manley, stuck close by the boys' side. "But I wouldn't want it to pounce down on me with those sharp claws. It would certainly leave some ugly scratches."

"I think," said Peter Ball, who, for the last half-hour, had been silent, "that we'd better look around for a place to camp for the night. It's getting too dark to see the trail well, and we might run into an ambush. What do you think, Bairdwell?"

"You're right, Peter," and Mr. Manley put the glasses to his eyes. "If I remember rightly, a little farther on the canyon breaks and we'll find a camping place."

He was right. In ten minutes the men came to a place where the canyon walls fell away. Far to the right was the rushing, swirling water of Whirlpool River. On either side great rocks rose majestically, thrown up, probably, by some convulsion of nature centuries before,

in a prehistoric age. These rocks formed a natural protection against the cattle raiders, unless they should come over the trail from the same way that the party had just traversed.

The men dismounted quickly and a fire was kindled, bacon was soon frying, and the aroma of coffee rose from the steaming pots.

"Gee, but I'm a hungry child, I'll tell a maverick!" exclaimed Roy, as he stretched his legs. "It isn't any fun riding so long in the dark."

"Whoopee! Look here!" Teddy's voice showed his excitement.

Nick Looker, who had been making coffee, sprang to his side, ever faithful to the trust of Mrs. Manley.

"Look!" Teddy held a gleaming object aloft. "Those rascals have been here all right! We're on their trail! Here's the pocket knife that scoundrel Hooley took from me the other day!"

Chapter X

NIGHT ADVENTURES

The finding of Teddy Manley's pocket knife caused great excitement among the rangers. Not because it was of any particular value, but that it showed that the rustlers had passed that way, and, perhaps, had encamped in the very place that the punchers were now occupying. They crowded around the boy, and each one must inspect the knife and volunteer an opinion as to how it got there and where the rustlers were at that moment.

The darkness of the canyon night had come suddenly. All around was blackness, and the camp fire cast weird shadows, that danced and flickered as the men moved to and fro arranging their horses for the night and gathering more wood for the fire.

Once a diminutive cottontail startled the rangers. It leaped forward into the firelight, and then, wild-eyed, bounded away into a thicket. Teddy's new mount rolled its eyes affrightedly and crashed through a clump of bushes, raising a harsh clatter of falling stones and rubble.

"Help me catch her, Nick," and Teddy was away in the direction that Beauty had gone. Nick was close at his heels, and in a few minutes the two brought back the bronco and tethered it to a stout tree.

"That's that!" exclaimed the boy, as he sat down on a rock and talked soothingly to the nervous animal. "Now, maybe, we'll have a quiet night." He looked at his watch. "Gee, hardly eleven o'clock. Long time until daylight."

Nick Looker came over and touched Teddy on the arm.

"Come over in the shadow of that tree. I want to talk to you," he said.

Surprised, Teddy followed Nick into the shadows.

Nick pulled something from his pocket. "Look at what I found when we were chasing Beauty," he said, and he showed Teddy a corncob pipe.

Teddy's eyes widened.

"Further evidence that the rustlers have been here."

"Feel of the bowl."

Teddy felt of it and his face grew grave.

"It's warm!" he exclaimed. "It hasn't been out long. What does it mean, Nick?"

"It means," said Nick slowly, "that there's a spy around. He isn't far away. We must find him, Ted. Don't say anything to the others just yet. We'll trail along and see what we can see."

The two went cautiously along the narrow path. By this time their eyes had become somewhat accustomed to the darkness, and the moon was now showing faintly through fast-moving clouds.

"There's going to be a storm," said Nick. "I wouldn't be surprised if it broke before long. I——"

Teddy gripped Nick's arm tight.

"Look!" he whispered. "Down there below us!"

Nick looked. About a couple of hundred yards away, on the lower path, sharply outlined against the sky, was a man. He was standing looking in the opposite direction from the boys, out into the valley.

Nick slowly raised his rifle. Then lowered it again.

"Can't shoot him in the back," he whispered. "It wouldn't be right. We've got to give him a chance."

Teddy nodded. "Yes, we've got to play fair, even if they don't. We'll watch and see what he does."

For several minutes the man stood motionless. Not a muscle moved. He was evidently a sentinel, watching and waiting for something or somebody. The sudden snapping of a twig caused Teddy to look the other way. Again he gripped Nick's arm.

"Look! At the path below!"

There, slowly coming up the trail towards the unsuspecting rustler, with its stomach almost touching the ground so low was it creeping, was an enormous wildcat or a mountain lion. Just which it was the boys could not determine at the moment in the dim light.

Closer and closer to the ground the beast hugged. Its big padded feet made only a soft thud. Once, when it turned its head and looked back, Teddy and Nick could see the shine of its great green eyes. Hideous eyes they were, like those of a huge snake prepared to strike. It was a large wildcat.

Pad, pad, pad. How soft those footfalls were!

The wildcat's tail twitched angrily. The muscles of its legs grew tense as it stopped and made ready to spring.

Nick Looker and Teddy were a-quiver with excitement. All they had to do was to do nothing. The wildcat would attend to the matter for them. When it sprung upon the man it would, in all probability, kill him. If it

did not, in the fierce struggle between man and beast that was bound to ensue, both the cat and the spy would roll over the edge of the cliff, over to the rocks below, and be killed. If they took the plunge, nothing could save them.

Neither Teddy nor Nick, however, wanted the man, even if he was their enemy, finished off in that fashion, without a fighting chance. They wanted to play fair, as Teddy had said.

The cat crouched lower. Its limbs scarcely moved. Again its tail twitched. The moment had come.

Crack! Nick's rifle spoke. The cat leaped into the air with an angry snarl, then fell to the ground. For a moment it lay still, then gave one last convulsive movement and rolled over the edge of the cliff. The boys could hear the stones rattle and the crash of the branches as the wildcat hurled downward.

The man, startled by the rifle shot, turned suddenly. He could not see those above him, but caught a glimpse of the cat as it disappeared into the darkness below. He started back in alarm, slipped on a smooth stone, and lost his footing. With a cry of horror, he began to slide down the sharp descent. Faster and faster he went. Nick and Teddy stood frozen, as he plunged downward. They could hear him as he hit rocks and trees. After a few moments the sounds grew fainter, then died away.

"He's gone," Nick said grimly. "Reckon there isn't much chance of his being alive after that fall. Too dark to look for him to-night, but we'll try to-morrow. Let's go back. We'd better not tell the men until morning about this. That fellow can't do any damage for a few hours, that's sure."

Upon their return to the camp Nick and Teddy found that sentries had been posted to guard against any chance of a surprise raid. Winters of the 8 X 8, Gus Tripp and Cass Cooper of the X Bar X, had taken the first watch.

Most of the men were lying upon the ground, on which a thick layer of pine needles served for a couch. Nick and Teddy curled up side by side, and, as they were tired, it was not long before they were asleep.

A half-hour went by. Then an hour. Nothing happened to disturb the watchers. They paced up and down from one end of the narrow defile to another and cast keen glances between the trees, and in the moonlight were able to see for quite a distance along the winding paths that curved like a snake around the mountain.

Gus Tripp and Cass Cooper were standing at one end of the camp talking in low tones when Gus's attention was attracted by the sharp bark of a fox. He turned and looked for a moment in the direction from which the sound came.

"Like to get a shot at that fellow," he said to Cass. "Wouldn't you?" As Cass did not reply, Gus turned around. Cass was not there.

"Gosh!" Gus's eyes widened. Then he noticed that the piece of soft shale on which Cass had been standing had crumbled and a streak in the earth showed a sliding rut.

So quickly had it all happened and so silently that Gus was dumbfounded.

"He's slid down the bank!" he told himself, aghast. Cautiously, so that he might not fall, Gus Tripp approached the edge of the cliff. His heart almost stood still. Cass had gone silently, without a sound. What did it mean?

Grasping a small tree, Gus leaned over and looked down. In the dim moonlight he thought he could see the form of a man, many feet below.

"Cass!" he shouted. "Are you down there? Are you alive?"

"You bet!" came a voice from below. "I'm stuck in the crotch of a tree. Can't get up or down. You'll have to pull me up."

"Wait. I'll get a rope." Gus ran swiftly to one of the broncos and produced a lariat, which every man carried. Tying it around the trunk of a tree, he let it down over the top of the cliff.

"Got it?" he shouted.

"No. Not long enough," Cass replied in disgust. "Get another."

Gus did so, and this time the rope reached Cass's hands. He made a loop and passed it under his shoulders.

"Heave hearty, my lad," he called. "And don't stop pulling until I tell you."

Struggling and catching at the protruding tree branches, with Gus's vigorous pulls, Cass was soon on the trail again.

"Narrow squeak," he commented. "Dirt slid right out from under my feet before I could say Jack Robinson. Scared, Gus?"

"I'll be a tush-warbler, if I wasn't," replied Gus soberly. "Why didn't you yell?"

"Yell? Didn't have time. Slid so fast it took my breath away."

Gus looked at his watch.

"Time to change outposts," he said. "Here, you fellows!" shaking Nick Looker, Roy and Teddy Manley by the shoulders and awakening them. "Get up and take your turn. We're sleepy."

As the boys stepped out into the path, a shimmer of lightning flared from behind the hills for a moment, then died away.

"Storm's coming," said Teddy. "I'll bet it will be a whopper. By morning we'll be in for it."

Chapter XI

THE STORM

The storm, that had been gathering for several days, did not materialise as quickly as Teddy had anticipated. The morning broke dark and lowering. Great black clouds, like giant bats, flapped across the sky, scurrying in rapid procession driven by the fast increasing wind.

Peter Ball scanned the sky anxiously.

"It's going to be a hummer when it comes," he said. "May break any minute now. But we've got to go ahead. Should there be a big storm, all traces of the cattle may be obliterated."

The men got an early start, but so low-hanging were the clouds that it seemed like twilight. The party soon picked up the trail again, however. The soft mesquite grass showed unmistakably where the hoofs of the animals had trodden it down. Among the tracks could be seen the shoe-prints of the broncos the rustlers had used when driving off the steers.

Nine o'clock found the party still on the mountain-side, although going steadily downward to a more level piece of country beyond. Mr. Manley rode ahead and Mr. Ball brought up the rear of the procession this time, with the Manley boys and the cowboys riding single file along the narrow and dangerous path.

Peter Ball rode with his hand on the rump of his horse, his body half-turned in the saddle.

Suddenly there was a sharp, tearing sound from behind the rider. It seemed as if a gigantic cloth was being ripped and torn. Then the noise died into a whisper. There was a shimmer of lightning that played along the horizon. In an instant, the sky from horizon to zenith was torn asunder. A vivid flame, like a great

yellow snake leaped upward. The thunder came in great booming crashes which were deafening. The clouds settled down, dark and forbidding.

The broncos, frightened at the outburst of nature, snorted and plunged. Their eyes were wild with fear and it took all the horsemanship that the men possessed to manage and hold them.

"Don't let them stampede!" Mr. Manley and Peter Ball shouted almost in unison.

Roy and Teddy, with their newly broken broncos, were having a hard time. The horses were herded together, with the men standing at their heads trying to soothe and quiet them.

"We've seen the worst of it," shouted Roy to his father. "It's growing lighter in the west. I'll tell a maverick, but that was some storm. I——"

Then something happened. The heavens appeared to have only rested. There was a sudden streak of lightning, then a terrific crash of thunder. It was a very bombardment of lightning. Roy was looking at a point of rock across a narrow ravine. There was the effect of a great ball of white fire hurtling to that pinnacle of rock. It seemed to hesitate a minute as if uncertain what to do. Then it bounced off and there was a splintering sound. For a moment Roy was awed. It was the first time in his life that he had seen an object struck by lightning.

"Each man look out for his own bronco. Hold him if you can. There's going to be a deluge in a minute!" shouted Mr. Manley.

Teddy had been forced down an incline by Beauty, who, wild with fear, had become unmanageable. Kicking and plunging madly, he dragged Teddy, despite his efforts, a couple of hundred yards into a group of oak trees, around one of which the boy managed to twist the bridle and thus hold the maddened animal.

Then, from the west, came a strange-looking cloud of a greenish-grey colour.

Most of the men, raised in the West, had seen such a cloud before and knew what it meant.

Wind! From the direction of the cloud came the sound of splintering and breaking trees. The noise grew louder and louder until it became a roar. The trees under which Teddy had been dragged by the bronco bent and groaned as if in agony and seemed to dig their roots farther into the ground. Most of them held. One, a tremendous white oak, could not stand the strain, and with a mighty tremor was uprooted and fell with a crash.

One of the branches of the falling tree struck Teddy a glancing blow on the head. Had he received its full force, it might have proved fatal. As it was, the boy was knocked senseless and lay in the pouring rain, white and still.

When Teddy recovered consciousness he found himself lying amid the wreckage of the oak grove. Two of the trees had been uprooted by the storm and lay in such a fashion that they pinned him to the ground. He was not hurt, but was held a prisoner by the great trunks and by the branches that were twisted in a tangled mass above him. There was a bump on his head where the falling white oak had hit him, but otherwise he was uninjured.

The storm had passed and the sun was breaking its way through the clouds. Nature was peaceful again after the convulsion of the elements.

"Gosh, that was some bump!" Teddy told himself, as he felt of his head. Wonder where the fellows are. Can't hear a sound."

"Hello!" he shouted, finding that his lungs were all right. "Nick! Roy! Come and get me out!"

There was no answer. The only sound was the sighing of the trees in the diminishing wind and the cracking of a branch here and there as it fell from a splintered tree.

"Nick! Hello!" Teddy was beginning to be worried. It could not be that the party had gone off and left him. Of course not! But where were they? Good Nick and Roy! And his father! Teddy's heart almost stopped beating as he wondered whether the rest of the party had been injured or killed by the storm.

For more than an hour Teddy struggled and pushed and tried to lift the trees that held him imprisoned, but it was useless. At last he gave up in despair and tried to make himself as comfortable as best he could in his cramped position.

"They'll find me," he told himself confidently. "It may take time, but I've been in tighter fixes than this and pulled out all right. I'm game."

There was a crackling of branches, and Teddy turned himself to see Beauty pawing at the fallen tree.

"Beauty, old boy. You're alive, are you, and come to find me! Good Beauty!"

Beauty came closer and nosed Teddy's face. It was a wet nose, but Teddy was delighted.

"Good old boy," he said again, as the bronco whinnied. Then as he looked over the wreckage of the trail, he saw something that made his blood race. Upon the mountainside was a man. At the distance, Teddy could not recognise who it was, but he was picking his way slowly over the debris caused by the storm.

It was slow work, as he had to leap from broken tree to rock, sometimes slipping and falling and tearing rents in his clothing on the splintered branches. Nearer and nearer he came, as Teddy watched with bated breath, fascinated by the hope of rescue. At last the man was within hailing distance.

"Hello!" Teddy's voice sounded shrilly in the mountain stillness. "Here I am! Over this way!"

The man stopped and straightened and put his hand back of his ear in order to hear more clearly.

"Here I am!" Teddy shouted again. "It's Teddy

Manley. I'm pinned down under a tree and can't get out." Then, as the man leaped over obstacle after obstacle more rapidly: "Why, it's Nick! Good old Nick!"

When Nick Looker reached the place where Teddy was, he presented a sorry spectacle. His clothing was torn, his arms and legs scratched and bruised. There was a cut over one eye caused by a piece of shale that had hurtled through the air when the lightning had hit the rocky point.

"Ted, old scout!" Nick's voice was full of unsuppressed emotion. "We've been looking for you ever since the storm. Are you hurt?"

"Nope. Only caught like a rat in a trap. But, Nick! Father and Roy and the rest of them? Are they alive?"

"Sure. All fit as a fiddle, but worried to death about you. Gosh, but that storm was a rip-snorter! Now to get you out."

"You lift the tree and I'll push," suggested Teddy. "Now then, both together."

Both of them pushed and pulled and lifted, but their combined strength was not equal to the task.

"Can't do it that way," said Nick, after several trials. "Got to think of some other plan. I have it!" he exclaimed, as he picked up a broken branch with a sharp point. "The dirt's soft here, Ted. I'll dig underneath and you'll have to burrow out like a rabbit."

It was not so easily done as said, though. But in an hour Nick had dug under the trees and Teddy had squirmed out, burrowing, as Nick had said, like a cottontail.

At last Teddy stood by Nick's side and Beauty whinnied his approval.

"Beauty found me," Teddy told Nick, as he patted the bronco's neck affectionately. "He gave me hope, for I knew that where a bronco could go, a man could."

"We've got to make our way down the mountain very

carefully," said Nick, as Teddy, eager to start, put a hitch in his belt. "Perhaps I'd better say where the trail was. It's gone now, after the storm. The men are on the flat piece just below."

There was great rejoicing when Nick and Teddy joined the others, with Beauty trailing along behind. Mr. Manley showed more emotion than Teddy had ever seen in him before, as he grasped his son's hands.

There was a sudden whir as a partridge shot up into the air and disappeared among the trees. Beauty regarded this interruption with distinct disapproval. He put back his ears, whinnied twice, and then trotted away faster and faster.

"Hey, Beauty, come back!" shouted Teddy. "I want to ride you." But Beauty kicked up his heels and vanished around a protruding cliff.

Chapter XII

BEAUTY RUNS AWAY

"Got greased lightning on his heels," Teddy Manley grumbled, as Beauty disappeared. "Just my luck when I want to ride him. Thought he'd had enough excitement for one day without starting any more. Oh, gosh!"

"Don't worry. I'll be hot on the trail." Roy sprang upon Gyp's back and vanished around the corner of the cliff. When the men followed them they could see Beauty far in the distance peacefully grazing, with Roy riding steadily towards him.

But Beauty did not intend to be taken so easily, now that he had once gotten his liberty. Long before Roy was within throwing distance of the lariat he carried, the bronco started off again, trotting in a zigzag direction, like a ship tacking.

Roy was an expert rider. He sat in the saddle as if he were a part of it.

"Best rider on the X Bar X, barrin' Teddy," commented Nick Looker, as he watched the race. "But he'll have hard work to catch that bronc, or I'm a pink-winged dodo bird. Look! He's gaining!"

For several minutes the men watched, training their field glasses upon the two broncos. There was a diversity of opinion whether or not Roy was gaining on the runaway.

"He's getting closer!" exclaimed Teddy eagerly. "Gyp's faster than Beauty. Roy ought to make it if he doesn't scare the bronc."

Just then a clump of trees and bushes blocked the view. When the horses came out into the open again, it seemed as if Roy had lost ground.

Roy was riding more cautiously now in an endeavour not to frighten the black pony. He knew that the chase might last all day until the broncos were tired out, unless he could get within throwing distance with his lariat.

He tried riding wide, trying to circle Beauty and get in front of him. But Beauty was not going to let himself be tricked in any such manner. He loped away, sometimes stopping to nibble some sweet clover, of which there were patches among the mesquite, but never stopping long enough to let Roy make any material gain.

Then it was that Roy tried strategy, a scheme that he had once seen an Indian apply with great success. He dismounted and tethered Gyp to a tree, and then began to strip it with his hunting knife of the low-hanging branches which were covered with thick leaves.

"He's going to try old Pontusuc's scheme," said Nick Looker excitedly, who had been training his glasses upon the boy. "They tried it in the war and it worked, but Pontusuc knew about it long before then."

"What is it?" Cass Cooper's voice was eager.

"Watch! You'll see."

Roy had found a strong, running vine from which he

stripped the leaves. With this he tied the branches of the tree around him. One minute he stood there, the son of the X Bar X. The next, there was only a tree with waving branches.

"Great! He'll make it!" Mr. Manley was proud of his son's resourcefulness. "Is there anything that boy don't think of?"

With one end of the lariat tied to Gyp's saddle and the other end around his waist, Roy urged the bronco on. Beauty looked around in surprise. Where was that man-creature who had been pursuing him? He saw only his friend, Gyp, standing beside a tree.

Gradually the bronco and the tree advanced towards Teddy's mount. Whenever Beauty looked around, Roy stopped. Then when the pony began to graze again, the tree and Gyp moved slowly forward.

Beauty, however, was inclined to be suspicious. He didn't quite understand the disappearance of the man. It was well for Roy that the wind was blowing from the direction of the runaway, otherwise the bronco might have scented him.

As Gyp neared the other bronco, Beauty gave a whinny of pleasure and Gyp replied. Nearer and nearer they came until the two horses rubbed noses. Then something unexpected happened; unexpected to the wandering Beauty.

With a quick movement Roy grasped his bridle and that of Gyp. The two broncos reared and plunged wildly. Roy, incumbered by the branches with which he was wrapped, had difficulty in holding them. At last he found the opportunity to cut the withes that bound him with his hunting knife, and the branches fell away.

"Got you, old boy!" he exclaimed, as he vaulted into Gyp's saddle and led the protesting Beauty behind. "Now we'll mosey back, you little rogue. Don't ever do that again."

Beauty eyed him reproachfully for the trick he had

played, but at last became resigned and trailed calmly in the wake of the exuberant Roy.

When Roy, with the two broncos, came up to the punchers, the men were loud in their praise. Teddy embraced his brother in his glee.

"Good scout, Roy! Finest piece of work I've ever seen! How did you ever remember what Pontusuc did?"

"Came to me in a flash," modestly answered his brother. "It's all in a day's work, Ted," he added.

"Now, we'd better start again," said Mr. Manley, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "We may have hard work pickin' up the trail because of the storm, but I reckon if we keep goin' north, we'll find it sooner or later."

Red Rock Mountain, as it was called, was not so much a mountain as a series of high hills, between which were several level plateaus, on one of which the chase of Beauty had occurred.

It was the opinion of Peter Ball, and of Mr. Manley also, that the rustlers had their headquarters in some place, perhaps on the farther side of the mountain, and it was with that idea uppermost that they started again to pick up the trail, if possible, that they had lost by reason of the storm.

Picking their way along over the uprooted trees and broken branches which the storm had left in its wake, the men crossed a level field. There they found unmistakable evidence that the cattle had passed that way.

A drove of even fifty steers make many tracks, and when driven in close formation, leave a well-beaten path behind them.

Nick Looker was the first to discover the footprints. He had been riding to one side of the line, and his shout told the others that he had found something of interest.

"Whoopee! They've been here! Look! They headed towards that cut; that's certain. The marks are plain."

The other riders spurred up their broncos and soon verified Nick's statement.

"You're right, Nick." Bardwell Manley's dark eyes glowed with the excitement that he did not attempt to suppress. "We'll follow the cut to the next incline. Perhaps, on the top of the hill, we may be able to find further evidence."

The cut that was before them was no more than a quarter of a mile long. Its sides were almost sheer and its bed flat. Into it the storm had piled dirt and broken branches, and it was with difficulty that the horses found a footing.

At last, however, the defile had been traversed and the men began to ascend a narrow trail that broadened and became easier to ride on as they went along.

Here, too, they found evidence of the passage of the raiders. Several bits of cloth that had been torn from the clothing of the rustlers by the sharp, protruding branches of the trees, which reached across the trail on either side, were seen. One especially large piece, which Teddy secured and held up delightedly, was a ragged fragment of red and black. It had evidently been torn from the jacket or shirt of some rustler who had been careless enough to ride close to a splintered branch.

"Look!" Teddy held it up for inspection. "That's from Harvard Hooley. He had just that kind of a jerkin on the day he robbed us. Remember, Roy?"

Roy took the cloth and looked at it carefully.

"Right you are, 'Ted," he said admiringly. "Takes you to remember things. Couldn't have told myself what he had on, but now you speak of it, that's his, all right."

"Sure." Teddy spoke condescendingly. He was always glad when he could put one over on his older brother. "I've got a photographic eye. Once I see a thing, I don't forget."

Mr. Manley examined the piece of cloth with great interest.

"Whoever wore it, didn't buy it around here," he said. "It looks to me as if it had been bought abroad. I don't think it's of American manufacture. The weave is too loose. We, here, like a close weave because we believe it wears better."

"It's Hooley's, then," said Nick Looker. "I've heard tell that the fellow's been to Europe. He used to tell stories to the boys about it on the ranch where he worked. Very interesting, so they said. That's from Hooley's jacket, all right."

"Perhaps we can fit the picce in when we catch him," observed Mr. Manley. "In the meantime, let's go on as quickly as possible. I know you men want to get at the wind-up of this thing without delay."

The men went on until they came to the other end of the cut. There, an unexpected surprise awaited them. The storm of the previous day, with its sharp bolts of lightning and tremendous crashes of thunder, had caused a landslide.

For a distance of a quarter of a mile, the trail, which had broadened as it left the cut, was a picture of destruction. But the men made their way over it as best they could, the broncos stepping gingerly over the stones and rocks. Ordinarily it would have taken but a quarter of an hour to go the mile that led to the next row of hills, but an hour elapsed before the party found the trail again.

They had just stopped to rest the broncos a few minutes when Teddy gave a shout.

"Look, there! There's a rustler!"

On a hill on the other side of the landslide was a man on a horse. His form was silhouetted sharply against the sky, which was now banked with fleecy, drifting clouds. The men held their breath. At last they had found one of the despised raiders.

Chapter XIII

THE RAID AT THE X BAR X

If the man was a rustler, however, he was acting strangely. It seemed as if he was trying to attract the attention of the punchers instead of to avoid them. He was waving his hat frantically and motioning to them, it appeared, to wait until he could reach them.

Teddy, who was using the field glasses, let out a yell.

"That isn't a rustler! It's Ben. Our Ben from the X Bar X! Gosh, I hope nothing has happened there! I'll bet he's got news of some kind. Look at him ride! He's coming this way. Hurry, up, Ben!"

Mr. Manley's eyes grew grave and those firm, grim lines came around his mouth once again. Would the news be good or bad?

As the cowboy from the X Bar X approached, the men cheered lustily. It was good to see one of their own punchers again, whether his news was good or bad. Ben was one of the most trusted of all the men on the ranch. He had been with Mr. Manley since the gold rush.

As he came nearer, the men could see that he had ridden hard. His bronco was flecked with foam and looked weary after its long, hard ride. Ben sat in the saddle, his body moving with the motions of the horse as if he were part of it. His clothes, however, were covered with mud, gotten when he had several times been pitched over the bronco's head when the pony had stepped into a hidden hole.

Ben used his right hand to hold the bridle, the other being stuck into the breast of his shirt. It evidently had been injured.

As he came up, the men sent up a loud shout and

gathered around him, eager for news, but the cowboy addressed himself to Mr. Manley.

"They raided the X Bar X yesterday," he said excitedly.

"Raided the X Bar X!" Roy and Teddy spoke as one man. "Our ranch?" and an angry look came into the eyes of both the boys. Mr. Manley's face also was dark with anger.

"Let him tell it the way he wants to, boys," he snapped. "Don't interrupt. Now let's have the whole story, Ben."

Thus encouraged, the cowboy cleared his throat and began:

"We were out riding herd on the west range, and were going to drive the bunch over to the south pasture where the grazing is better. There were about eight hundred head of our best cattle there." Ben lingered a little over the word *our*, as if he took pleasure in the proprietary note. "You know, Mr. Manley, with the herd spread like they were, it's hard to tell at a glance whether they're all there."

Mr. Manley nodded. "Yes, you're right. But get on with the story."

"As I was saying," went on Ben, "just looking at them critters it was hard to see that they weren't all there. But I could see that they weren't acting natural. They were skeery-like, and some of them were bunched together and some others were galloping around as if somebody was after them."

"Jim," I said—Jim was riding next to me as we got into the pasture. 'Something's wrong.' 'Think so myself,' says he, and then the other boys come up and we talked it over. Then we started rounding up the herd. And believe me, when we got through there was a hundred of the best steers gone—plumb disappeared as if they'd dropped off the earth!"

"Couldn't you see their tracks where they'd been

driven off?" asked Teddy impatiently. When the boy told a story he got right to the point at once, and he had small patience with anybody like Ben, who rambled on, bubbling over with details. .

"I was jest coming to that; don't hurry me." Ben enjoyed being the centre of attraction and was going to make the most of it. Mr. Manley, impatient as he was to get the whole news, knew that the quickest way was to let the cowboy take his time. The man, though garrulous, was one of the most reliable and loyal of any of the punchers.

"When we were rounding 'em up," went on Ben, "we saw, 'way to the south end of the pasture, a place where the grass was trampled down a lot more than other places—all in a bunch. 'That's where they druv 'em,' says I to Jim, and Jim, he says, 'yeah'. All the boys rode down there, and sure enough we found the wire fence had been cut. We mended it so the others couldn't get out"—Ben always prided himself on his foresight—"and then we started after those rustlers lickety-split."

Roy and Teddy were squirming impatiently in the saddles and would have prodded the cowboy to quicker action, had not a look from their father restrained them.

"What did you find on the other side of the fence?" asked Teddy, thinking that perhaps his anxiety would spur Ben on. But Ben was not to be spurred.

"Grass, mostly," he answered laconically. "A bunch of mesquite that had been trampled down by a hundred hooves, and here and there the print of a horseshoe. And one of them broncs was shod funny. The caulk on his left hind foot was gone, so it wasn't hard to follow his tracks.

"Well, as I was saying, after we went over the fence we followed those tracks for quite some ways. Seemed as if they bunched them animals all together and were driving them like all possessed. They wren't riding

wide, but as close together as they could. 'Afraid, I reckon, they might get separated.

"Well, we kept going after them tracks, and they led us up one of those steep hills to the south. 'When we git to the top,' says I to Jim, 'we most likely will git a glimpse of them rustlers.' An' sure enough, when we did git there, what d'you suppose we saw?"

Ben paused dramatically, like a well-trained orator, stimulating suspense.

"Grass," said Teddy mischievously. Even in the tenseness of the moment, he wanted to plague Ben.

"Grass!" Ben's voice showed his disgust. "No, it wasn't grass. It was them hundred head, all bunched together as I said they'd be, and 'driving 'em was them rustlers."

"You saw them?" Roy's voice was eager.

"Sure, we did. They was away off, and driving them steers like fury. But we could see 'em all right. 'An' we counted 'em. 'There's ten,' said Jim. 'More than that,' says I, 'there's an even dozen.' Jim was mad because I contradicted him, but he counted again, and had to admit I was right.

"One of those fellers, who seemed to be the leader, was whipping his bronc all the time. I picked him out because he had on a funny-looking shirt. Could see it with the glasses real plain. Black and red squares, and——"

Teddy almost tumbled off his mount, so eager was he to show Ben the piece of cloth he had found.

"Did it look like that?" Teddy thrust the fragment under the nose of the surprised puncher.

"Sure, that's it! How did you get it?"

"Found it growing on a tree. But go on, Ben. What did you do next?"

"Called a council of war, to consider the exigencies of the case." The cowboy liked to use big words and had a list of them which he had copied out of the

dictionary, but which sometimes did not apply to the case in question.

"You see, there was twelve of them and only five of us. We could fight like blazes, but if them twelve rascals got real lively, some of us was going to get plugged. An' that's just what did happen."

"Some one got shot? One of our men? Who?" Mr. Manley spoke sharply.

"Charley Green. But I'm gettin' ahead of my story."

"Was he hurt much?" Teddy could not wait.

"Leg split considerable. But as I was saying, after we'd talked it over, we agreed to chase those rustlers and let 'em see the kind of stuff the X Bar X men are made of. Couldn't sit still and let 'em get away with that hundred head. So we rode after 'em lickety-split.

"After we got over the brow of the hill," continued Ben, "they saw us coming. They acted some flurried at first, and I could see the tall man with the red and black shirt was making a speech. Seemed to me from the signs he was making he wanted the fellers to beat it, but they didn't think that way, and some of 'em came around the back end of the bunch of cattle and was waiting for us when we arrived."

"And you boys chased them, though they were two to one?" It was Pop Burns who spoke, and his eyes shone. "Wish I'd a been there too."

"Sure, we chased them! As I said, they was waiting for us. Three or four of the fellers were driving the cattle on as fast as they could, and the others covered the rear from the enemy, as they say in the war.

"First thing we did when we got near enough was to fire. An' then they fired. An' ther. we fired. An'——"

"Cut it short, Ben," Nick Looker commanded. "Never mind they fired and we fired. How did it come out? Did you get back the steers?"

Ben smiled, unruffled by Nick's reprimand.

"As I said, we both kept firing, and one of the

rustler's broncs got hit and reared up and threw the feller, and he couldn't catch the bronc again, so he clum up on the saddle behind another feller. We rid behind trees and bushes an' such, but they kept gettin' away and drivin' the cattle fit to kill."

"How did Charley Green get hit?" Mr. Manley was always anxious about his men, and was grieved that any of them should be injured.

"It was the last of the fight. I was loadin' and I looked up and I see one of the rustlers a drawin' a bead on Charley. 'Look out, Charley,' I hollered, 'or he'll get yer.' But Charley didn't move fast enough. Bang, and Charley dropped with a bullet in his leg. I let go at the feller, but he ducked and run off."

"Was Green bad hit?" Peter Ball spoke for the first time, although he had been listening intently to Ben's recital of the fight.

"Flesh wound. We bound up his leg and put Charley on a bronc and toted him home. Mrs. Manley telephoned for Doc Ring, and he come out and fixed Charley up fine. Said he ought to be able to be around in a week. Charley was mad as a hornet at being put out of it without a chance to get back at them rustlers."

Ben was nursing his arm, which was in a bandage.

"You hurt, too?" Roy liked the cowboy in spite of the man's exasperating slowness.

"Just a sprain. I started out just after that storm blew over to try and find you. We 'didn't have much of it at the X Bar X. But when I got down here! Jumping grasshoppers! Never saw such a wreck of a place. Got pitched over my bronc's head and lit on my hand. Nothing much," and Ben put his hand in his shirt again.

The news that the X Bar X had been raided caused Mr. Manley much concern. It was not so much the loss of his prize stock, although the financial end of it was considerable, but because it showed that the rustlers

were well organised and had evidently decided on the plan to raid the different ranches successively. With such tactics they hoped to divert attention, and while the men of one ranch were engaged in chasing the raiders, a raid on another ranch would probably be made.

Peter Ball and Mr. Manley held what Ben would call a "council of war to consider the exigencies of the case", and also asked the opinion of several of the punchers, who had had experience before in the handling of rustlers.

Pop Burns was chief among those who advocated a combined effort.

"Don't think there's enough of us to cope with those fellers," he said. "We ought to have more men, but we can't spare any others from the X Bar X or the 8 X 8. Don't you think, Mr. Manley, it would be a good plan to send a rider around to the other ranches and get men from each and let 'em join our forces, or come up from the other side of Red Rock Mountain, if possible, and we get the rustlers between us?"

Mr. Manley was pleased with Pop Burns' logic.

"A very good idea, Pop, and we'll carry it out. First, though, let's get from Ben just exactly where this all occurred. It will save time, and we want to know where to join forces. Draw a map, Ben, of the exact location."

The cowboy took the piece of paper Mr. Manley handed him and, producing a pencil from his boot, began to sketch in a rough way the scene of the excitement.

"They were headed south," he said, giving Mr. Manley the drawing, "and going towards Red Rock Mountain. There's no doubt about that. I——"

Nick Looker gave a yell.

"I'll bet they're headed for Rustlers' Gap!" he shouted excitedly.

Chapter XIV

THE BLUE LILY TRAIL

Rustlers' Gap was a more or less mysterious location. Everybody had heard of it, but no one on the X Bar X and the 8 X 8 ranches had ever been there. There were many stories about it. First, that in the olden days the Indians had a large village at one end and used it as a means of exit in their sorties against the whites. In latter years, it was supposed to be the hiding-place of rustlers from which they made their raids upon the neighbouring ranches, and through which, to the plains beyond, they drove the captured cattle.

It was located towards the south, and was a defile through Red Rock Mountain. It was undoubtedly difficult to find, unless one knew the exact spot, as there were many defiles and many seeming defiles which ended in blank cliffs of rocks. It was now, however, the goal of the rustlers, and they meant to press on until it was attained.

The rustlers, led by Harvard Hooley, evidently had made Rustlers' Gap their headquarters, and unless the attacking party was large, could undoubtedly hold the narrow defile against the punchers.

It was for this reason that Peter Ball and Mr. Manley decided to send for reinforcements.

"I want three of you men to ride to all the ranches in the neighbourhood, and get as many men as possible to join us," said Mr. Manley, after Ben had told his tale. "I think, Ben, you have ridden enough for one day, so you can stay with us if you want to."

The cowboy's eyes glowed.

"I sure do!" he said quickly. "I want to get a whack at those fellows for stealing our cattle and shooting

Charley Green. If I ever get my hands on them!" and Ben's face twisted into a ferocious scowl.

"I don't blame you." Mr. Manley smiled at the cowboy's earnestness. "Now, I'm going to pick Gus Tripp and Winters of the 8 X 8—and how about you, Nick?"

Nick Looker stepped to Mr. Manley's side and spoke in a low tone.

"Not but what I'd like to go, Mr. Manley," he said. "But Mrs. Manley asked me to keep by the boys' side through it all, and see that they came to no harm. I promised her I would, so——"

Mr. Manley's face brightened.

"That's a good promise, Nick, and what Mrs. Manley says goes. You keep close to Roy and Teddy and I know everything will be all right. Pop, suppose you go with Gus and Winters. You each can cover three ranches and get five or ten men from each. When they are added to our force we can beat anything."

The men set up a yell at this, and Pop Burns sprang upon his bronco.

"I'll go, Mr. Manley, gladly. Old Pop ain't forgot how to ride, and when I get out of this landslide, I'll go lickety-split and be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail." Pop turned his bronco in the direction that Ben had come. "Hurry up, you fellows. Bet you a pipe of tobacco that I'll hustle up more fellows than both of you together."

"We're on," laughed Gus. "Don't forget the kind I like, 'Roaring Bull'. Nothing to beat it in the country."

When the three men had gone, it was decided to send out scouting parties to try, if possible, to locate the rustlers and get their position. Both Mr. Manley and Peter Ball agreed it would be foolish to make any attack until reinforcements arrived, as their small force had been further depleted by the going of the three messengers.

"*We'll ride wide,*" said Mr. Manley, as the men prepared to start. "We won't always be able to keep in sight of each other because of defiles and detours we'll have to make on account of the landslide. But we can always call——"

"Let's have a code," interrupted Teddy enthusiastically. "I'll tell you. Two shots quick after each other, mean 'want help'. Three shots, 'all right'. Four shots 'have sighted rustlers'. How's that?"

Mr. Manley and Peter Ball both laughed.

"Fine. Now everybody remember what Teddy said. Cass, what's the code?"

"Four shots, 'hurry up'," replied Cass promptly. "Two shots, 'don't come'. Three shots, 'I've seen 'em'."

A shout went up from the men, while Teddy looked at Cass disgustedly.

"I'm a ring-tailed dodo bird, if you're not the worst I ever saw, Cass," he said. "Here," taking a piece of an envelope from his pocket. "I'll write it down for you. Then see if you can remember it."

"Thanks." Cass took the rebuke good-humouredly. "Never was good at rememberin'," and he pinned the paper on the inside of his shirt.

"All set?" Mr. Manley sprang upon his bronco and turned him towards the south.

"Riding wide", in the parlance of the West, is the opposite of riding in column formation. The men spread out, twenty yards or more apart, keeping in sight of each other and forming a semicircle, which gradually narrows as the cattle are driven towards a definite point. This is easy on the plains or on level ground, but in such a place as Red Rock Mountain, with its many hills and defiles, it was more difficult.

Roy, on the extreme right of the line, came to a defile which looked to him as though it led to a spot where they might encircle the rustlers. Always adventurous, Roy slipped away from the others without a word.

After twenty minutes riding he came out on the further side of a bog.

This marsh was caused by the overflow from a creek which ran sluggishly towards Whirlpool River. It was about a quarter of a mile wide.

Roy, riding not with his usual caution, urged Gyp too near the edge and the bronco stepped into a hole, pitching Roy over his head.

The boy landed on a rock. The force of the fall stunned him, and he lay prostrate, with Gyp nosing his face. At that moment, Nick Looker, on the opposite side of the marsh, discovered the accident. He did not know of the trail which Roy had taken, and there was no time to look for it.

Nick tethered his horse to a tree and raced down the hill to the edge of the bog. Its slimy surface glistened in the rays of the setting sun and seemed to mock him with its brightness. Running out into the swamp, in irregular lines, were rows of blue lilies, the fleur-de-lis, whose heads bobbed and nodded in the freshening wind.

Nick was quite sure that the fleur-de-lis grew generally where there were stones. Would they pilot him to safety? he wondered. At any rate, he must get to Roy quickly, and there was no other way but to cross the swamp. He must be true to his trust, whatever happened.

At his feet was a stick, a part of a branch of a tree that had been broken off by the recent storm. Nick picked it up and without hesitation started to cross the marsh.

At his first step into the bog he went in over his shoe tops. Then he tried again and again, with the same result. At last he managed to find a footing, but it was at best slippery and uncertain.

Slowly, very slowly, he went on, feeling his way with the stick. Step by step, following as closely as possible

the rows of blue lilies that reached out over the marsh, sometimes in a straight line, but often in zigzag turns, making a split trail that confused him.

So great was Nick's eagerness to get to Roy that he wanted to rush forward, no matter what the danger might be. But he resisted the temptation. Each piece of turf and stone he tested before he let his weight upon it. On and on he went, until, at last, he reached the middle of the swamp.

All around him was the green, slimy water of the bog, and as he looked at it weird pictures came before Nick Looker's eyes. A thousand faces seemed to be leering at him from below. A thousand hands reached out their fingers to drag him down.

He stopped. His head was in a whirl. A haze came before his eyes. He reached out gropingly, bewildered. As he started on again, one foot slipped, he lost his balance, tried to get a footing but failed, and floundered into the clinging mire of the marsh.

The cowboy struggled hard and struck out with his stick. It snapped in the middle. Farther and farther he sagged into the bog. He could feel the cold, murky water seeping in through his clothes. Once more he stumbled. .

A cloud went over the sun. Nick could see those leering faces again among the lilies, dark and sullen. He reached out with what was left of the pole, but the stick broke off short in his hand.

Then, as he looked, Nick's heart sank. The line of blue lilies had disappeared; nothing but rank growths of grass greeted his eyes. Pools of bluish-green water were everywhere in the fifty feet that separated him from the opposite bank. That was all.

Was the path, if there was one, straight or zigzag? Nick could not tell. The fleur-de-lis had forsaken him. There was nothing to guide him now. But he must go on.

Nick took a long breath and squared his shoulders.

"Buck up, Nick," he said to himself. "You've been in many a worse fix and got out of it. You'll get out of this one." Then as he looked at Roy, lying on the edge of the bank, he saw that the boy stirred.

Nick's blood raced. He was not too late! Not too late if he got through.

"I'll make it," he told himself again. "Not very far now. Hey, Roy, I'm coming."

At the call Roy slowly opened his eyes. The sunlight almost blinded him at first, reflected from the shining water of the bog. Then, as he caught sight of Nick, Roy sat up at once.

"Good old Nick," he said faintly, for Roy had been much shaken by his fall. "I knew you'd come."

"Sure!" Nick felt he must not fail now. Ahead of him was nothing but a swale of cold, dank weeds, but he struggled on again. On and on! Then, his heart quickened and he laughed aloud as his foot felt a firm stone beneath it. The end of the swamp had been reached.

Clambering up the bank, Nick was soon at Roy's side.

"Hurt much, Roy?" he asked anxiously.

"No. Took a cropper and it knocked me out for a while. Nick, you're a sight. You don't mean to say you crossed that bog!" and Roy shielded his eyes and looked out over the gleaming marsh.

"Sure did." Nick was trying to get some of the mud from his clothes. "Saw you lying here and had to get to you as quick as I could. I was afraid you'd roll over into the water and drown."

Roy looked at Nick's drawn, anxious face and realised what his friend had been through.

"Good old Nick," he said again, affectionately. "There's a trail around, if you had only known."

"Didn't have time to look," replied Nick promptly.

"I got here and you're all right, that's the main thing. Suppose we start back. You can show me the way."

Then, for the first time since they had been on Red Rock Mountain, came the owl call of the rustlers. That the person giving it was some distance off, was plain, as the call was faint. Yet, as Roy and Nick listened, it came nearer in the freshening breeze:

Hoot! Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!

Chapter XV

THE SMELL OF SMOKE

It took some time for Nick and Roy to go back over the trail that Roy had traversed so quickly. Roy insisted that Nick ride Gyp, which Nick at first refused to do. He soon realised, however, now that the strain was past, that he was tired from his battle in the swamp, and at last consented to mount the bronco while Roy walked ahead to show the way. Neither neglected to keep a constant watch on either side for a possible enemy.

When they reached the spot where Nick had tethered his horse, they found the animal impatiently pawing the ground and pulling at the strap that held it. The bronco whinnied with delight at the sight of Nick, and rubbed his nose affectionately against the puncher's sleeve.

Quickly the pair resumed their position in the line, which had been broken by their escapade in the swamp. The men had made little progress. The landslide and the steepness of the trails, as they went farther on to Red Rock Mountain, prevented them from riding rapidly. In addition, Mr. Manley did not want to come up with the rustlers until reinforcements arrived. Always solicitous of the welfare of his men, he was afraid that some of them might be hurt should the raiders attack with their superior force,

As soon as Teddy caught a glimpse of Roy, he spurred up Beauty and was soon at his brother's side.

"I've got it," he said, his eyes blazing with excitement. "Their code. Did you hear that owl call just now?"

"Yes." Roy was eager to hear what Teddy had to say.

"It was four hoots," went on Teddy. "That means that some one has sighted us and is giving the warning signal to the other rustlers to look out. Plain as day."

Just how Teddy had arrived at his conclusions he did not say, but Roy agreed that he was probably right.

"It was a warning, I'll tell a maverick! Does father know?"

"Yes; I told him. He said 'keep watch, and go slow'," and Teddy made a grimace. "I'd like to rush in and give them a thrashing before the others come up. You and I could beat the bunch of them, Roy."

Roy smiled at his younger brother's enthusiasm.

"Don't be too sure, Ted. Don't forget that Harvard Hooley and that other fellow beat us, two to two, and there's twice our number in Rustlers' Gap."

"But they didn't play fair." Teddy's dark eyes grew darker at the thought of what had happened that other day. "They hit you on the head and took our pistols. We didn't have a chance. It was a low-down trick."

"And they're just as tricky to-day. What father and Mr. Ball say is only common sense. We've got to lie low, for a day maybe, until the other fellows are here. Gosh, but I wish they'd hurry up! I want to get at them as much as you do! Think Pop Burns and Gus made it?"

"Sure." Teddy was confident. "Pop's a wizard on a horse when he's all keyed up as he was when he left, and you know how well Gus can ride."

"Two of the best riders on the X Bar X," replied Teddy. Then he grinned.

"What's the joke?" Roy questioned.

"Was thinking about Bug Eye. I'll bet he's racing around in his old chariot spreading the news 'to every one he sees. Too bad he couldn't bring it up here."

Roy's laugh rang out in the stillness of the forest. He had a vision of the snorting, grdaning chariot thumping up and down those mountain trails.

"They wouldn't have to give any owl signals if Bug Eye was along," he said. "That old boat of his could be heard a mile away."

If Roy could have known what was going on with Bug Eye and his chariot he would have laughed the more.

When Bug Eye learned of the raid on the X Bar X by the rustlers and the loss of a hundred head of Mr. Manley's best stock, he was furious. It was bad enough when the 8 X 8 had lost a few cattle, but those steers of Mr. Manley had been the pride of all the ranchers who had seen them, and Bug Eye determined he was going to do his share in getting them back.

With that end in view he approached Mrs. Ball, who was sitting with her nieces, Ethel Carew and Nell Willis, on the ranch-house veranda.

"I've just got to do somethin'!" he said earnestly. "I can't sit around here just keepin' watch. I've just got to take the old chariot and hustle around to some of the ranches tellin' the news. Bet I could round up more punchers than those three riders can. Mayn't I go, Mrs. Ball?"

Mrs. Ball looked at the earnest face of the man who was so loyal to her and the owners of the X Bar X, and smiled.

"Of course you can go, Bug Eyc. Take your chariot and go to the other ranches, if you want to. We've got enough men here to keep guard, and I reckon the rustlers are on Red Rock Mountain now and won't bother us."

Bug Eye was jubilant. He made a rush for his car, but was stopped by a shout from Ethel Carew.

"Oh, Bug Eye, take me with you! I want to see the fun."

Bug Eye shook his head vigorously.

"No, siree-~~e~~—ma'am, I mean. Not goin' to take anybody but myself. If the old boat gets actin' up I don't want no women folks along. Might be gone a day or two; all depends. No sirec-e, ma'am, I mean. I'm goin' solo."

So Bug Eye went off to the garage, which was an old shed at one end of the corral, where the chariot slept when it was not burning up the road.

That morning the old car was petted as never before. "Got to get her in fine shape before I start," Bug Eye told the ranch hands who crowded around him. "Can't take any chances with her this time."

So Bug Eye oiled every possible place that called for oil and a few others. He filled the radiator with water, and filled the gasoline tank to the brim. Then, having made sure that everything was in order, he climbed in.

"Go it, cowboy. Whoopee! Don't let her get the best of you!" the punchers shouted, trying to disconcert the enthusiastic Bug Eye. "Take a shot at Harvard Hooley, if you see him."

But Bug Eye paid no attention to their jeers. He had other things to think of at that moment. The business at hand was to get the chariot started. For a wonder, it made no protest, and Bug Eye was jubilant.

"I'll show you fellers!" he shouted, as the car gathered speed and shot out of the corral. "Got the chariot tamed now. She eats out of my hand. Whoopee!"

The good-natured shouts of the cowboys were lost to Bug Eye as the chariot pounded down the road and was soon lost in a cloud of dust.

That was Bug Eye's day of triumph. Never before

had he felt so important. Talk about the ride of Paul Revere! Rushing down the streets of Concord and Lexington, the minute-man roused the farmers to fight for their homes. But in Bug Eye's opinion, Paul's ride was not in it with the ride he, himself, was now taking. He was bearing a "message to Garcia". Not that he had ever heard of Garcia, but the motive of Bug Eye was the same as the man that braved the dangers of the Cuban everglades on that other fateful day.

From ranch to ranch drove Bug Eye, telling of the raid on the X Bar X. Many of the ranches had already been visited by one of the three riders that Mr. Manley had sent out; but in two instances Bug Eye was the first to bring the news and his heart leaped with pride as he saw the cowboys hastily making ready to join the reinforcements.

Once, when going at full speed, the chariot groaned and stopped suddenly, nearly throwing Bug Eye on his head. For several minutes no amount of persuasion could make the car start. Bug Eye tried everything he could think of, but to no avail. Then, without warning, the chariot started of its own accord.

"She's like a cantankerous kid," Bug Eye told himself in disgust. "Like to give her a good lickin', but got to handle her with gloves."

That was Bug Eye's day.

On Red Rock Mountain the dusk came early. The sun sank slowly, like a great ball of fire, behind the high hills, and the tall trees were silhouetted against the background of orange and red. The Whirlpool River, seen far below like a silver snake, wound its way in and out, and its rushing cascades made little rainbows of spray, as they dashed over hidden stones and rocks.

The men on Red Rock Mountain, however, had no eyes for the beauties of nature at that moment. The setting of the sun meant to them the coming of darkness,

and darkness was always a menace when enemies were lurking in its folds. "The night has a thousand eyes," it is said, and, while using their own, the punchers from the 8 X 8 and the X Bar X could feel those invisible eyes peering at and searching out their movements.

So it was that when camp was struck and the evening meal over the men paired off two by two to do sentry duty and scout around.

Roy and Teddy Manley were together, and they decided to explore a side trail that ran snake-like along one side of the mountain. It was hedged on either side by a thick growth of small trees. So dense were they that it was almost impossible to see what they sheltered. Above them, however, the fast fading light came dimly, and Teddy and Roy, who both claimed that they had "owl's eyes" and could see in the dark, had no difficulty in making their way along.

The boys were, in fact, very sharp-sighted, and, as soon as their eyes became accustomed to the gloom, were little troubled by the darkness. This trailing in the dark, both boys loved. There was something about the mysterious darkness, that concealed they knew not what, that appealed to them, and to fathom what lay behind that murky curtain and pit their wits against any one who might be lurking there was a delight.

Going slowly, so that their broncos might not stumble or walk into some pitfall, the boys kept on for more than an hour.

"Say, Ted, wouldn't it be fine if we captured Harvard Hooley, just us two, alone?" suggested Roy, after a long silence.

"Great." The idea appealed to Teddy, who wanted to lay his hands on the "educated rascal". "Let's scout around, Roy, and maybe if luck is our way, we'll find him."

It seemed, however, that the goddess of chance was

not to favour them with her smile that night. Nothing developed, and in the interim between the setting of the sun and the rising of the moon, the trail grew darker. A brisk breeze had sprung up at dusk, which was blowing directly against the boys, something that was in their favour should the rustlers be in the vicinity.

Suddenly Roy stopped, and sniffed the air suspiciously.

"Smoke!" he exclaimed. "I'll tell a maverick! Bet you those rascals have set the woods on fire. Smell it, Ted."

Teddy's nose was not so keen as Roy's, but in a moment there came the unmistakable odour of burning wood.

"You're right, Roy. Where does it come from? I wonder. I bet it's a camp fire!"

Chapter XVI

THE DISCOVERY

Smoke is a difficult thing to trace, especially on the mountains. With a brisk breeze, such as was blowing that night on Red Rock Mountain, the fire from which it came might be a considerable distance away. But smoke it was, the X Bar X boys were sure, and where there is smoke there is fire, and where a fire is kindled there must be some one to light it. So Teddy and Roy Manley were certain that they were now near to the rustlers.

Both boys had to a great degree the Indian sense of alertness and perception, and the ability to follow up a trail where there was the slightest clue. Delighted that they had now something to work on, both were keen and eager to get to work.

"Wish old Pontusuc was here," said Roy. "He's got

the keenest nose I ever saw. Seems to be able to smell out anything a mile away and go right to it. Never saw such a fellow."

"Poof!" Teddy was disdainful. "We can do as well as he could. Two heads are better than one, anyway, even if one is a sheep's head."

"Who has a sheep's head? Isn't me." Roy liked to tease his younger brother, and he pretended to be very much offended by Teddy's remark.

Teddy grinned. "Didn't say any one had. That's one of Bug Eye's pet expressions. But really, Roy, this is our chance, and I bet we'll find out a lot if we can find that camp fire."

Roy agreed. "We'll make it, Ted. But we've got to be careful. If those fellows ever discover that we're trailing them and that we're only two, they'll land on us like a ton of bricks. Got your pistol handy?"

"Sure." Teddy took his pistol from the holster and examined it carefully. All six chambers were loaded, and the boy had cleaned it thoroughly just before leaving the X Bar X. Each boy wore a belt of cartridges, and should there be any fighting they had plenty of ammunition.

"Asked Pontusuc once," went on Roy, "what was the secret of successful trailing, and he answered right off the bat: 'Caution.' Reckon he was right, Ted. Can't be too careful when we're up against that educated Harvard Hooley."

Teddy agreed. "First thing we'd better do," he commented, "is to tether our broncs. If we rode them anywhere near that fire they'd be sure to snort and give us away. Broncs don't like smoke. Remember one day when we were burning brush how Star and Flash acted like all possessed?"

"You bet." Roy was already getting off his pony. "Here's as good a place to tie them as any. Right under that clump of hemlocks over there. Can't anybody see

them from the trail and we'll know just where to find them."

The boys led their mounts to the little grove a hundred feet away from the trail, and there tethered them securely to the trunk of a tree.

"Sorry to leave you, old boy," said Teddy, patting Beauty's neck affectionately. "I like Flash a whole lot, but I'll never forget how you found me when I was pinned under those trees and stood by me."

"Come on! Never mind the bronc." Roy was getting impatient. "He'll be all right. We've got a lot of tall work ahead of us to-night, and there's no time to be lost."

"Coming." Teddy gave Beauty a parting pat and hastened after Roy, who was moving quickly among the dark shadows of the trees. "We'll catch up with those rascals, and lick them to a frazzle, as Nell says, before we're much older."

Something like a sigh came from Roy. He liked Nell Willis immensely. She was just the kind of girl that a wide-awake boy wanted for a pal. Clever and always ready for fun. Roy hated a mushy girl. There was nothing mushy about Nell. He wondered what she was doing at that moment. Sitting on the veranda of the 8 X 8 probably. Or, maybe, helping Mrs. Ball and Curly with the dishes. A picture of the ranch-house rose up before him, and——

"Snap out of it, Roy. Gosh, that girl's got you going! Can't even speak of her but you go mooning."

The progress of tracing the smoke to its source was not as fast as the boys thought it would be. Often the wind, which was blowing from the north, would veer to the east for a few minutes and the smoke would seem to be coming from that direction.

In order not to acquaint the rustlers of their approach, they had to walk carefully. Both had put on rubber-soled shoes in anticipation that they might

have to sleuth it, but, despite their utmost care, the trail seemed fated to give them away.

During the recent storm many branches had been broken off and were scattered along the path. These cracked and snapped as the boys stepped on them. Even the little twigs made a sharp pop as they broke, which, in the stillness of the forest, seemed to the X Bar X boys like the crack of a firecracker.

Once Teddy slipped on a round, smooth stone and would have fallen had not Roy caught him quickly. The stone bounded down the hill and then hurtled over the edge of the cliff into the ravine below.

Bump! Bump! Bump!

"Gosh!" Teddy was disgusted. "We're as bad as Bug Eye and his chariot. It's always calling out, 'I'm coming'. I hear it a mile away. If those rustlers have any kind of ears, they'll spot us, sure."

"Can't help it. Can't be any stiller, Ted. But I reckon it sounds louder to us than it really is. If they do hear anything, will probably think it's some animal attracted by their fire. Guess we're safe enough."

Just then the wind came from the north again. Teddy's eyes blazed.

"Smoke's getting nearer," he whispered excitedly. "Smells real strong now. Get it, Roy?"

"I'll tell a maverick!" Roy was as excited as his brother. "We'll have to switch off the trail, it goes the other way now. I bet they've got their fire under a cliff, or something, and we'll strike it soon."

The boys left the narrow path and were soon wending their way between the trees which grew in dense profusion on that part of Red Rock Mountain. It was hard travelling, and their progress was not very fast. The branches and bushes scratched their faces and hands and tore little rents in their clothing. But so eager were they to find the camp fire that they paid no attention to what a woodsman calls trifles.

As they went along, the ground became more uneven; the rocks and stones more frequent, and the ground more slippery from fallen pine needles and leaves that had been shaken down by the storm that had so recently passed that way.

At last Roy gripped Teddy by the arm and whispered in his ear:

"We'll have to crawl, Ted. It will be slower but surer, and we'll not make so much noise."

Roy dropped on his hands and knees and crept on, with Teddy close behind. Roy could hear him chuckling to himself in the darkness.

"Now what's the joke, Teddy? Let us have it."

"Was just wondering what Nell and Curly would say if they could see us now. Jiminy, wouldn't they laugh! If we ever get out of this we'll have some fine old tales to tell."

"I'll tell a maverick, we will!" Roy was chuckling, too. "But hush, Ted. We're getting nearer. Gosh, the smoke makes my eyes smart."

As the wind dropped a little, the smoke settled among the trees and began to drift slowly towards the boys. It was like a cloud of fog and the boys could not see ten feet ahead.

"Gosh!" Teddy spoke admiringly. "I'll tell the world those rustlers know how to build a fire. Bet they're burning down all Red Rock Mountain, by the smoke."

"Not so bad as that." Roy liked to correct his brother's little exaggerations, to which Teddy was prone. "The wood's green, that's what's the matter. They don't know enough to take dead trees. I'll bet a doughnut to a penny it isn't Harvard Hooley that's doing it. He'd have more sense."

"Hope it is, though. Like to get my hands on the rascal, I'd——" Teddy began to move his hands as if he were wringing the rustler's neck. Then he reached out and caught Roy by the leg.

"Look over there! To the right! Past those white birches!" he exclaimed. "Do you see anything, Roy?"

"There's a light! I'll be a ring-tailed dodo bird if we haven't got them at last! Go slow now, old boy, we mustn't let them know we're around."

The boys turned in the direction of the faint glow that came from just beyond the birches. Moving inch by inch, they crawled along, stopping every few feet to listen and make sure that they had not been discovered.

A fox whisked by them in the darkness and crashed through the undergrowth. The fierce, round eyes of a night owl peered down at them, as if wondering what new kind of animal had invaded the forest. From the other side of the ravine they heard the snarl of a wild-cat as it hunted its prey.

"Lot of people out to-night," whispered Roy whimsically. "Hope we don't run into any of them. Might be unpleasant."

"Sh-h!" Teddy was peering eagerly through the darkness. "They're just the other side of those birches. Let's crawl up, and I'll bet we'll see them."

Slowly, despite their eagerness, the X Bar X boys crawled along. The birches were reached and the glow became brighter. Then, as they went a little way beyond, the boys gasped. There, under a big cliff, a crevasse in which formed a natural chimney, was a camp fire. Logs had just been piled on the burning embers and the smoke was curling lazily upward. At that moment, the trunk of a tree that had been on the top of the pile broke asunder and the flames shot high into the air.

By the sudden light, the boys could see three men in the garb of cowboys seated before the fire and talking earnestly.

Chapter XVII

TEDDY GOES FOR REINFORCEMENTS

At the sight of the men, who could be none other than the despised rustlers, the X Bar X boys were greatly elated.

Teddy's heart pounded so hard that he was sure that the men must hear it, and he would not go on until the throbbing had subsided a little. Roy's blood raced and he was as excited as his brother. But Roy was older and prided himself that he had more self-control than Teddy. He knew that the supreme moment had come, in that they might learn the plans of the rustlers, if they could get near enough to overhear the conversation without being discovered.

The men were talking in low tones and, at the distance, the boys could not hear what was being said.

"Got to get nearer, Ted," whispered Roy. "We'll just have to hear what they're talking about. We'll have to worm our way along until we get right up to them. Gosh, I hope they don't discover us! If they do, it will be all up. Got your pistol ready?"

Teddy's hand crept to his holster and he unbuckled the flap. He was not afraid, but he knew, like his brother, that if the men should see them there would be a fight—and it was three against two. Besides, they wanted to learn the rustlers' plans, if possible, and find out what they proposed to do and where the headquarters of the gang was located.

"Wish the smoke would come this way, and make a smoke-screen," muttered Teddy under his breath. "It would help us a lot."

As if in answer to Teddy's wish, a sudden gust of

wind came from the direction of the fire and brought a cloud of smudgy smoke. So unexpectedly did it come, that the two boys had all they could do to keep from coughing. They choked and sputtered and pressed their handkerchiefs hard over their mouths and noses. The pungent odour of the burning pine made their eyes water and smart, and it was not until the smoke lifted a little and sailed lazily above their heads that they could press on again.

"Gosh, that was some smoke-screen!" whispered Teddy huskily. "Felt as if I had been gassed. Know now how Peter Ball felt when he was in the trenches."

"Sh-h-h." Roy was afraid the men would hear, but at the distance it was impossible. "Come on, Ted. Play you're a snake now, and don't make a sound, for the love of Mike!"

The place that the rustlers had chosen for their camp fire could not have been a better one for the purpose of the boys. The open space in front of the cliff where the fire was burning was not large. All around it was a dense growth of small trees, and the undergrowth of bushes and smaller shrubs was so thick that it formed a natural screen behind which the boys could approach without danger of discovery. The only risk was the cracking of the branches and twigs, which was apt to occur unless the boys used great caution. They had often seen the old Indian, Pontusuc, stalking his game, and had tried the feat of gliding along silently on their stomachs, until Pontusuc had praised them for their ability in following his lead.

To play snake, as Roy had suggested, was now their part. Silently, moving but an inch at a time, the X Bar X boys crawled along, keeping their eyes fixed on the three forms by the fire, which they could distinguish indistinctly through breaks in the undergrowth.

They had not advanced a foot when one of the men rose and stretched, and, walking to the edge of the

open space, stood looking fixedly in the direction of the boys.

Roy, who was ahead, instantly stopped, and Teddy, in his excitement, gripped his brother's leg so hard that Roy winced. Both boys had seen the old Indian "freeze" when danger was at hand. At that moment they imitated his example. With every muscle tensed, so that they might spring should they be seen, they lay motionless, scarcely daring to breathe. Teddy pressed his handkerchief over his nose so hard that he almost choked.

Silhouetted against the glowing background of the fire, the boys could see the man plainly. He had evidently been attracted by some noise in their direction.

He was tall and straight. He had a cadaverous-looking face, high cheek-bones, deep-set eyes surmounted by black, shaggy eyebrows. In a sleeveless shirt, the boys could see that his arms were bunches of muscles which stood out plainly in the firelight.

Roy was a-quiver with excitement.

"Harvard Hooley, I'll bet!" he whispered to Teddy, who had drawn alongside of his brother.

"No." Teddy was sure. The picture of the man who had robbed him and his brother was strongly fixed in his mind. "He's too tall. Besides, Hooley was fatter. I'll remember him to the end of the world."

Just then one of the men by the fire turned, and, seeing his companion some distance away, called to him.

"Hey, Cagey, what you lookin' at? Hear a wildcat or somethin'?"

"Nope." Cagey spoke loudly and the Manley boys had no trouble in hearing what he said. "Had an idea I heard something over in them bushes. Maybe that crowd from the X Bar X are on our trail."

"Ha! Ha! Gettin' nervous, are you? Them rangers are still on the other side of Red Rock. That storm

fixed them. Take them a week to dig out. Saw some of their horses runnin' loose. We'll have those steers well away before they know where we are."

Cagey, however, seemed not so sure, for he kept peering in the direction of the boys. At that moment a fox crashed through the thicket just in front of Teddy and Roy, showed for an instant as it crossed the open space back of the camp fire, and disappeared in the bushes.

"Old red tail." Cagey laughed loudly and went back to his companions. "Can't fool me. Knew there was something moving about. Liked to have got a shot at that feller. Make a fine cap for next winter."

Each of the boys gave a sigh of relief and began again to crawl slowly ahead. It was ticklish work, and their muscles and nerves ached from the strain. Inch by inch they went along until they had reached a point near the fire from which they could clearly hear the conversation of the three rustlers.

Cagey, the tall rustler, was sitting hunched up on a log smoking a corncob pipe. The other two men were of stocky build. One of them, with a red face, had a scar across one cheek that showed that at some time or other he had come in close contact with a knife. The other was shorter, with black beady eyes that seemed never to be still. It seemed to Roy that they were boring through the darkness and must surely discover the two boys as they lay there, holding their breath.

As Cagey knocked the ashes from his pipe and began to refill it from an old leather pouch, the man with the scar began to talk loudly.

"What do you know about that Harvard Hooley? He makes me tired. Thinks he knows it all just because he's got a bit of learnin'. What's learnin' got to do with rustlin' cattle? I want to know. Nothin', says I. Take me now—Art Bradley. Been at this business twenty years and rustled more critters than Hooley ever seen. Wish we were rid of that feller."

The short, black-eyed man dissented. "Learnin' is a great thing. Wish I'd had more of it when I was a kid. Wouldn't be on Red Rock Mountain now. Always wanted to be a lawyer. But my old dad couldn't see it, so I had to go into the cattle business. Bah!"

Cagey struck a match and, after lighting his pipe, flicked it over into the bushes.

"Reckon Art's right, Hank. Don't take no stock in this Hooley myself. Upstart of a feller. What he don't know about rustlin' would fill one of those big books he's always luggin' around. Can't learn about rustlin' from books. Hasn't any sense, that feller. What's the good of putting us three out here to-night? Rustlers' Gap's a full two mile off and them ranchers ain't anywhere around, I'll bet. Keep watch, says Hooley, and if you see any of them, give the hoot signal. Good mind to hoot anyway, so——"

"Hooley's got a good head," broke in the man called Hank, twisting himself around so he could reach Cagey's pouch and helping himself to some tobacco. "He knew which of those steers to rustle from the X Bar X. Gosh, but they're a fine lot! Ought to bring a hundred apiece—ten thousand dollars. Holy mackerel, I wish I had it."

"But he hasn't any sense, that's what gets me," said Cagey earnestly. "He hasn't got those steers we got from the X Bar X and the ones from the 8 X 8 out of the Gap yet. Won't be able to for a week, for he can't ship 'em all at once. If he did the railroad would suspect somethin'. Now, what do you suppose he wants to do?"

Cagey stopped and looked at his companions in the manner that a stump speaker does when he makes a point.

"Know what he wants to do?" he asked.

Both men shook their heads.

"Wants to make another raid on the X Bar X—

to-morrow night, most likely. Says the best time to make a raid is right after the first one, for they won't be expectin' you. Most of those punchers are out after us, he says, and it ought to be easy with nothin' but a lot of old coots left behind with the women folks."

Teddy was so excited at this news that he sat up suddenly and hit his head against a branch. The leaves shook violently for a minute and Teddy's heart jumped. But the men were too engrossed in their discussion to notice so slight a thing as moving leaves.

"Mightn't be so bad a plan at that," said Hank meditatively. "But how'd we get there? That Bardwell Manley isn't any fool, and he's comin' after us full tilt. Got some of Peter Ball's men, too, I reckon, and maybe some others. Hooley's greedy, that's what's the matter. Wants to gobble up everything in sight. Some day that feller's goin' to get caught. Then he'll get his, all right."

There was no answer to this argument, and Cagey and Hank rose and began to pile more logs on the fire.

Roy put his lips close to Teddy's ear and spoke softly.

"Ted, you go back to father and tell him what we've heard. He ought to know as soon as possible. These men will probably be here all night, for they'll do as Hooley says, no matter how much they kick. I'll stay here and keep watch."

Teddy's face grew sober. He did not like the idea of leaving Roy alone, but he saw the wisdom of what his brother had said. Slowly, very slowly, he began to turn his body around.

"Tell father if he'll send up a lot of the punchers we can take these three fellows prisoners without firing a shot. They don't think anybody's around. Once we get them trussed up we can make them talk."

"I'll go," and Teddy began to wriggle away. "But, Roy, think you'll be all right? They won't get you?"

"Sure I'll be all right! I can take care of myself. When you get far enough off so they won't hear you, you can hurry. 'Bye, Ted."

"'Bye, Roy," and Teddy wriggled away.

Roy Manley had a stout heart, but when he saw his brother's feet disappear in the darkness he felt very much alone. Would the men discover him? he wondered. And if they did, what would happen?

Chapter XVIII THE CAPTURE

When any one is waiting for something to happen, especially if that event is likely to be of a crucial nature, time becomes exaggerated. Every second seems a myriad of minutes. Minutes turn into hours, and an hour, in the imagination of the one who is in suspense, is no less than a lifetime.

For some time after Teddy's departure, the rustlers sat around the burning logs without talking. Roy could see them plainly, smoking their pipes and gazing moodily at the glowing embers. It was evident that they were not at all pleased with the situation, and Roy was anxious lest they decide to abandon the camp before Teddy could summon help.

Fifteen minutes went by. To Roy it seemed that a couple of hours had passed. He was beginning to be worried. He wished that the men would talk. The silence was becoming unbearable. At last Cagey yawned and laid down his pipe on a log.

"This sittin' around doin' nothin' gets my goat," he said. "Ain't used to it. Me for some action. Good mind to go out an' browse around for a while an' see if I can't start somethin'."

The man called Hank looked up startled.

"Don't do it, Cagey. 'Tisn't safe. Maybe those

punchers are 'way off, but ag'in, maybe they ain't. If they should be around and we git took, we'd never hear the last of it from Hooley."

"Bah!" Cagey spoke disgustedly. "Hooley can go chase himself for all of me. I'm not goin' to sit around all night like a bump on a log. Well, so long, fellers, I'm off," and Cagey stood up and began to buckle his cartridge belt more tightly around his waist.

A little shiver went up Roy's spine. What if Cagey should come his way and discover him! He gripped his pistol tightly and waited for the rustler to move. Cagey hesitated and seemed uncertain which way he would go. He looked in every direction, then stood looking fixedly into the darkness where Roy lay concealed. Roy's heart leaped. Was it going to be a showdown?

Finally, Cagey decided to try his luck in the opposite direction. He walked around to the other side of the ledge and, grasping an overhanging limb of a tree, slid down the steep incline. Roy watched him disappear until only his head showed above the rocks. Cagey stood there grinning for a moment at the men by the fire.

"So long, fellers," he said again. "Next time you see me maybe I'll have company. Like nothin' better than to grab one of those cowboys from the X Bar X who think they're so smart. I'd take him back to Harvard Hooley. Bet I'd stand in right with the chief then. He'd make me a general, maybe."

"Look out you don't get took yourself," sang out Art, knocking his pipe on a rock. "I'd just die laffin' if you did. Serve you right."

"Bah!" Cagey's head disappeared below the ledge, and Roy could hear him crashing and thrashing in the undergrowth as he made his way down the hill. The noise grew fainter and fainter until it ceased altogether. Would Teddy never come?

The two men left by the fire were evidently glad that Cagey had gone.

"He don't know enough to come in when it rains," observed Hank. "Hope he does get caught. Ball and Manley ain't no fools. Bet they're hot on our track right this minute."

"Cagey would squeal on us if he does get caught," said Art gloomily. "He's just that kind. Then our goose would be cooked. We oughtn't to have let him go."

"Couldn't have stopped him" Hank rose and peered into the darkness. "He's one of those wise guys who knows everything. For me, I'm goin' to stick to Hooley."

"Me, too. He's our best bet," replied Art. "If we get those steers through to the railroad and ship 'em, we'll get what's comin' to us."

"Said he'd give us five hundred each," mused Hank. "Five hundred, and him makin' ten thousand! He's a cheap guy, all right."

"Well, five hundred ain't so bad for a couple of weeks' work," replied Art. "But if there are any further raids, we'll raise the limit to a thousand. What d'you say, Hank?"

"I'm with you there! Shake," and Hank put out his horny hand and gripped the equally horny one of Art. "We'll stand together, buddy, and when the other fellers hear about it, I bet old educated Hooley will have to shell out or go out of business."

Roy grinned as he lay in the darkness and listened. How he hoped that Teddy would bring the men quickly. It would be a joke if they could capture the two rustlers. For several minutes he considered the plan to try to take them single-handed. Then he looked again at the stockily built men, each with two pistols in his belt and a long hunting knife that gleamed and flashed in the firelight, and as the men moved, he gave up the plan.

"Got to wait until Ted and the boys come," he told himself disappointedly. "Gosh, but I wish they'd hurry up!"

"Well, here goes for a snooze," said Hank, taking off his puncher's coat and rolling it up for a pillow. "If Hooley thinks I'm goin' to sit up all night lookin' at nothin', he's mistaken."

"Me, too. I'm as sleepy as a new-born calf. Roll over in the shadow, Hank. No need of lettin' those fellers see us easy, if they should come. Got to take precautions, as Hooley's always sayin'."

But Hank was already dead to the world, lying in the glow of the fast-dying fire.

For ten minutes there was absolute silence, broken only by the snores of the tired rustlers. That ten minutes seemed unending to Roy Manley. He was lying on a small hillock from which he had a good view of the camp. He was just wondering, for the hundredth time, what Teddy was doing when something happened that was not on the programme.

Restless, Roy moved more than he meant to, and a smooth, round stone was dislodged. It rolled slowly at first, and Roy reached out to grasp it, but did not reach far enough and the stone eluded him. It rolled down to the camp fire, in between the two sleeping men. A second, and larger, stone followed. This hit Hank on the foot.

In an instant the two rustlers sprang to their feet and, with pistols drawn, were crouching in the shadow of the cliff. For a moment they did not comprehend what had happened. Then, as they saw the stones lying before the fire, they drew their pistols and fired into the darkness.

Bang! Plof!

The bullets flew into the clump of trees where Roy was hiding and bit into the wood above his head.

Bang! Plof!

'This time the rustlers fired lower, and Roy had a narrow escape. One of the bullets whizzed close to his head and cut off a lock of hair.

The boy had drawn his pistol and was about to return the fire, when he hesitated. To do so would be to assure the rustlers that there was some one in the bushes. If he kept quiet they might think it was some animal prowling around, and he would have a chance for his life. So, much as he would have liked to have a shot in return, Roy hugged the ground and began to back slowly away.

The men by this time were thoroughly frightened. They threw themselves on the ground, clutching their pistols with nervous fingers.

"Knowed somethin' like this would happen if we went to sleep," whispered Hank. "It's them on'ery punchers. They've stole a march on us. What'll we do, Art? Maybe there's a dozen of them."

"Don't believe it's them at all," replied Art, who took the matter more calmly. "If it had been they'd've potted us while we slept. Wouldn't have throwed stones to wake us up."

"Maybe you're right." Hank would have liked to believe that Art was right. "Bet it's an animal of some sort. It's one of them wildcats, most likely. Red Rock Mountain is full of 'em."

"I'm not goin' to take any chances, bet your bottom dollar," responded Art, nervously. "We'll lay low for a while and see what happens."

Roy by this time was some distance away and, knowing that it was useless to try to overhear anything more that night, he got to his feet. Lying so long on the damp ground in a cramped position had made him stiff and sore, and for a moment it seemed that he could not walk. In a few minutes, however, after rubbing his legs briskly, he found he could use them.

Believing caution was no longer necessary, he started

to return the way that he and Teddy had come, in the hope of meeting the reinforcing party, which he thought must be near. The noise of his crashing through the underbrush was heard by the rustlers, and they fired again.

Plof! Plof!

Their fire was wild this time, and their bullets sang harmlessly over Roy's head.

"Bum shots, those fellows are, I'll tell a maver——"

Roy did not finish. He was suddenly grasped from behind. Two arms that seemed like bands of steel encircled his shoulders and held him fast. He never thought it possible that anybody could squeeze as tight as he was being squeezed. He wondered vaguely who it could be. Then, all of a sudden, he remembered.

Cagey!

He had forgotten the rustler who had slipped away from the camp fire after telling his companions he was going to start something. It must be Cagey!

Roy suddenly ceased to struggle and grew limp. It was an old trick, but it surprised Cagey. For just a moment his grasp relaxed. With a quick movement Roy squirmed from the man's grasp and dealt him a heavy blow on the jaw. Stunned for a moment by this sudden attack, Cagey wavered, then struck out blindly.

Roy was not where the blows were aimed, however, and they fanned the air, causing Cagey to lose his balance. Another blow from Roy brought him to his knees. Although his antagonist was a much taller and heavier man than he, Roy had the advantage in that he had often boxed while at school and had developed considerable skill in the art.

As Cagey staggered to his feet, Roy aimed another blow at him. This time, the boy overreached himself and fell on the slippery leaves. In an instant Cagey was upon him, and this time he did not let go. Gripping Roy's two arms behind him, the rustler forced him

ahead, along the narrow trail, through the stinging brush that tore and scratched the flesh of both, until at last he dragged the resisting Roy into the light of the camp fire.

Cagey was jubilant. When he saw the other two rustlers, who stood with pistols drawn at his approach, he shouted excitedly:

"Told you I'd bring some one back with me. Didn't believe me, did you, loafing around doin' nothin'? Well, here he is! And he sure packs an awful wallop, believe me. Look him over and tell me if you've ever seen him before."

Art gave Roy one glance and let out a yell.

"You bet I have! It's the Manley kid, from the X Bar X!"

Chapter XIX

EXCITING ADVENTURE

The bringing of Roy Manley as a prisoner to the camp fire of the rustlers was not at all pleasing to the companions of Cagey. They were shrewd men, despite their roughness, and they were certain that the boy had not come to Red Rock Mountain alone. They surmised that he was merely an outpost of the ranchers who had come in pursuit of the rustlers. It would probably mean a prison term for them if they should be caught, and they knew that should a company of the punchers from the X Bar X and other ranches attack them, resistance would be useless.

Cagey, however, was jubilant at his capture.

"Told you I'd bring some one back with me," he said again, as he sat Roy upon a rock and covered the boy with his own pistol. "It takes Cagey to turn the trick. Had a feelin' that there was some one in those bushes, so I jest scouted aroun'. Heard you fellers shootin' and the kid runnin' away. So I just played

possum. Backed up ag'in a tree and never moved. Then pretty soon the kid come along, scared to death, and I grabbed him."

Roy looked at the rustler scornfully.

"Didn't look as if I was very much scared when I landed you that one in the jaw, did it?" he snapped.

Cagey felt his face carefully and winced as his fingers touched the bump that Roy's blow had raised.

"You certainly pack a big wallop for a kid," he admitted. "Gosh, thought you had me goin' for a minute. But you couldn't beat Cagey. That trick of yours, goin' limp, was a new one on me, though. Where'd you learn it?"

"Where men are men and there aren't any educated rascals like Hooley," retorted Roy.

The three men looked at each other in alarm.

"He knows more than we think," said Hank to Cagey in a low whisper. "We've got to be careful what we say. Don't give anything away."

"Bah!" Cagey tried to appear indifferent. "We've got him now, and he'll stay put for a while. Got an idea while I was bringing him in. We'll hold him for ransom, like the bandits do I've read about in the papers. Old man Manley would pay a good sum, I reckon, rather than see his son hurt. One of you fellers has got to take a note to him, telling him to leave a thousand plunks in a hollow tree, and then we'll let his little boy go. I know how it's done; haven't read police news and detective stories all my life for nothin'."

"Not me." Hank shook his head decidedly. "I'm goin' to beat it back to the gang just as soon as I can."

"Nor me, neither." Art was just as positive as Hank. "Don't like this business, Cagey. He isn't alone, you can be sure of that. Might be a raid on us any minute. I'm going to beat it back to Hooley."

"So Harvard Hooley's the head of this gang, is he?"

Roy spoke pleasantly. He was playing for time and hoped that at any minute Teddy might return with the punchers. Besides, he was going to get all the information he could.

Then, as the men did not reply, he went on. "I met this fellow Hooley the other day. Nice, pleasant sort of a man, isn't he? Took everything I had and left me with a bump on my head. Bet he'll double-cross you fellows if he has a chance."

The men exchanged glances, but refused to commit themselves.

"Got those cattle over in Rustlers' Gap, hasn't he?" Roy went on. "Thinks he's going to get away with them. But we'll get even with him if it takes a year, I'll tell a maverick!"

Cagey looked at Roy suspiciously.

"Who you goin' to tell?" he questioned sharply. "Never heard tell of that fellow Maverick. He one of your crowd?"

"You just wait!" Roy's eyes flashed. "You'll meet him some day, and a whole lot of others that you won't like so much. But, say, let's not fight. How'd you like to throw over that rascal Hooley and work for a white man?"

"Bard Manley?" Hank began to show interest. "Heard tell that the crowd at the X Bar X were A1. Guess, though, they wouldn't take a rustler. Always thought, though, I'd like to work for a real outfit. Reckon, though, it's too late now."

Roy moved a step farther from the fire. Cagey swung his pistol significantly.

"See here, young feller, what's all this palaverin' about? You can't talk yourself out of this fix. We've got you good an' plenty. Now which one of you yeller dogs," turning to the other two men who were talking in low tones some distance away, "is goin' to take the bid to Manley? Don't be fools. We've got a chance to

grab off a bunch of money. Make it two thousand, and there'll be five hundred smackers for each of you. Manley'll pay it. He's got more money than sense when it comes to his kids."

Roy, who had been watching Cagey closely, had observed two things. His own pistol was not in his holster. In all probability he had lost it during the fracas in the woods. He was toying carelessly with Roy's pistol, which was fully loaded. He was more intent on what Art and Hank were going to say than on his prisoner.

Roy tensed his muscles for a spring. He thought if he could take Cagey off his guard he might get away. If he could only get hold of his pistol! This time he would not hesitate to use it. If Teddy and the ranchers would only come!

Trying an old trick, Roy looked suddenly out into the darkness, and a smile lighted his face as if he had seen a rescue party. For just a split-second Cagey's attention was diverted as he glanced up anxiously to see what had caused the boy's pleased expression.

That was just what Roy had hoped. With a bound, he was upon the unsuspecting Cagey, knocked the pistol from his hand and secured it, and with a shove pushed Cagey over on to the glowing embers. Then he leaped away and was lost in the darkness.

Cagey bellowed loudly as he picked himself up and brushed the burning brands from his clothes.

"Here, you yeller dogs, chase him! He got his pistol an' I lost mine in the mix-up. Fire, you waddies, fire!"

Roy did not believe that the two men would be in any hurry to help Cagey recapture him. He also knew that each had fired his pistol twice when the stones had rolled into the camp, and he did not believe that they had reloaded. Cagey's loud voice told him that his surmise in regard to the lukewarmness of Art and Hank was correct.

"Here, give me those guns, you fools! Are yer crazy? I'll get that feller again, you sap-heads."

Plof! Plof!

Cagey was firing at random as he raced after Roy. The boy could hear him wildly crashing through the bushes, muttering to himself, "I'll get you, you smart aleck! And when I do you won't get away again."

Bang! Bang!

Only two more shots in each pistol, if Cagey had them both. If he would only fire the others, Roy was convinced that he would be safe. He made a thrashing among the trees, then dropped to his stomach and waited.

Plof! Bang!

Only two more cartridges. But Cagey did not seem disposed to use them. Instead, a sudden silence reigned on the mountainside. A little chill ran up Roy's spine. The man was at his old tricks again—he was pursuing silently, as before.

Roy listened intently, but the only sound that came to him was the sighing of the wind in the tree-tops. Then a twig snapped near by, and Roy gripped his pistol hard. It was only an animal, however, that had been disturbed. Roy caught a glimpse of its great green eyes as it scurried away in the darkness.

For several minutes the boy stood motionless. Then, as nothing more was heard of the rustler, he began to crawl very slowly on his hands and knees in the direction that he supposed was farthest from the camp. In his flight, however, in the almost black darkness, he had become confused and was actually retracing his steps towards the camp fire.

Realising his mistake at last, Roy lay motionless, trying to get his sense of direction. Suddenly, from out of the darkness loomed a form that launched itself upon him so quickly that he had no time to defend

himself. Again those arms of steel were around him and jerked him to his feet.

"Thought you'd get away, did you?" Cagey's voice was harsh and strident. "Thought you'd hoodwink Cagey, did you? Can't do it, kid. Wasn't born yesterday. Consarn it, now you're goin' to git what's comin' to you."

Roy allowed himself to be led back to the camp without a word. He knew it was no use to struggle, for Cagey's grip was like a vice.

The second time that he was brought to the camp, Cagey was more belligerent. He had wrenched Roy's pistol from him on the way and was evidently determined to use it on the slightest provocation.

"I'll fix you this time," he said harshly, as he flung Roy to the ground. "You don't play that trick on Cagey twice. No siree-e!"

Taking a piece of rope from his pocket, he bound Roy's arms behind him and made a loop around his feet. Then he fastened one end of the rope to a log.

"That will hold you. Now then, you yeller pups," turning towards Art and Hank, who had been watching the proceedings gloomily, "no more nonsense. Are you goin' to take that bid to Manley or not?"

Receiving no answer, Cagey took a piece of soiled paper and a pencil from his pocket and began to write laboriously. After he had written he read and re-read what he had written several times.

"That will do the trick. Read it, kid," and he held the paper before Roy's eyes. In the dim light of the dying fire Roy had difficulty in making it out. At last he managed to decipher what had been written.

Mr. Bard Manley:

We've got your kid where he can't get away. He won't be hurted if you come across, but if you don't—
LOOK OUT. Give the feller what brings this two

thousand bucks and we'll turn the kid loose. No stallin' now.

Cagey hesitated as to how to sign the missive, and looked at it dubiously for some time after he had shown it to Roy. Then he took his stub of a pencil and slowly signed, "Harvard Hooley".

"He'll be scared when he sees the chief's name," he stated. Then he turned scowlingly to Roy.

"Say, kid, are you all alone? Isn't a gang waitin' just outside, is there?"

"If I had a crowd with me I wouldn't be a prisoner, would I?"

Cagey did not answer, but spoke in low tones with the two rustlers. After a few minutes' conversation the men prepared to depart.

"Goin' to leave you, kid, for a while. These waddies are scared to go alone. Hope you sleep tight and don't anything bite you."

With widening eyes Roy watched the three men disappear in the darkness. Tied as he was, he knew that anything might happen. Would it be friend or foe who would next appear? he wondered.

Chapter XX

ALONE ON THE MOUNTAIN

To be left alone on a high mountain on a dark night, at the mercy of man or beast that might wish to do one harm, is not a pleasant experience. It is a predicament that might well cause the stoutest heart to quail. But to be in such a situation with hands and feet bound, firmly lashed to a huge log, as was Roy Manley, is a position that could hardly be worse.

Roy had always been full of courage and a fighter. He had never been known to falter or cower before

overwhelming odds. It was his nature to look on the bright side of things. But that night on Red Rock Mountain, for the first time in his life, fear gained the upper hand. He knew that he was in a desperate position, and if he was not rescued promptly he might easily become a prey to the wild animals that roamed the mountain, to say nothing of the rustlers who would, in all probability, return without the ransom they sought and wreak their disappointment and anger upon him.

A chill ran over him. His arms ached and smarted, tied tightly as they were with the rustler's rope. In that moment pictures came to Roy Manley in flashes. He saw, as upon a screen, the X Bar X ranch-house with its wide veranda. His mother and Belle Ada were there, probably asleep by this time. Or maybe they were awake thinking of him and wondering what he was doing.

Then the scene shifted to the 8 X 8. What were Nell Willis and Ethel Carew doing? He wondered if he would ever see Nell again. Good little Nell. What a pal she was! Roy's eyes grew moist as he thought of her. There was nothing sentimental about Roy; but his friendship for this city girl who had taken so naturally to the ways of the West was an experience that he had never known before.

"If I ever get out of this——" he muttered, talking to himself to keep up his courage, "well, we'll have some gay old times again, I'll tell a naverick!"

Roy smiled as he remembered Cagey's misinterpretation of the word. He tried to think where he had learned the expression, but could not. Somehow, his mind would not work aright.

Hoot! Hoot!

Roy knew that it was not the rustlers' signal this time, but the cry of an owl somewhere near by. He heard the flap, flap of the great wings as the bird sailed by, and caught a glimpse of its big, yellow eyes as it peered around, looking for its midnight meal.

Then Roy heard something that made him strain the harder to break his bonds. Something or somebody was coming. He could hear a prowling in the bushes. Was it Teddy coming back? No, for Teddy, even with his rubber soles, could not make that soft, padding sound.

Pad! Pad! Pad!

Could it be a mountain lion? Roy shuddered as he thought of the wildcat that had almost attacked the watching rustler a few nights before. He had played fair and saved the rustler's life. Why couldn't other people play fair, too? If he had only not been bound, he could fight. But he was helpless.

Pad! Pad! Pad!

Whatever it was, was coming nearer. Roy could see the bushes wave and move to and fro as the animal approached. A flickering ember on the fire that had almost gone out broke in two and blazed for a moment, then died again. But in that instant Roy caught a glimpse of the big cat as it stepped cautiously out from behind the bushes.

There wasn't any doubt about it now. In another minute, or two at the most, the boy believed that he would be attacked. He knew what that would mean. He would not have a chance. A wildcat's claws are sharp and cruel, and so are its teeth. No, he was helpless, alone, on Red Rock Mountain.

"Oh, Lord," he prayed, "send help. Don't let it get me!"

After that prayer he felt better. The nervous fear of something intangible in the dark was fast slipping away.

Pad! Pad!

The cat was slinking nearer. Roy could see its great, green eyes shining in the darkness. Wonderful eyes they were, and they fascinated Roy as he watched them.

Then came other noises from out of the darkness. The sharp bark of a fox and the crackling of the bushes as it caught sight of the cat and scurried away. The hoot,

hoot, of the owl again, this time farther on the mountain. And that! What was that? The whinny of a horse?

Roy's eyes went back to the cat again. It was slinking closer, hugging the side of the cliff as it slowly approached.

"Whoopee-ee! Yeo-o-o-ow! Skidoo-ool!"

There was an answering shout from behind the rocks. Roy's blood raced. Could it be an echo? Probably. But the cat was not to be deceived. With an angry snarl at being baulked of its prey, it leaped into the bushes and disappeared.

Then there was a great crashing in the undergrowth, the sound of voices and of horses' hoofs. The bushes parted and Roy could see vague forms of men. In the dim light he could not distinguish their faces, but as they came nearer, he knew.

There was Teddy. Good old Teddy, always on hand at the right time! And Nick Looker and Gus Tripp and Cass Cooper and another puncher from the 8 X 8. He was saved!

"Here I am, under the cliff! I'm tied up. Let me loose!"

Teddy's knife flashed and Roy felt the ropes fall away. Stiffly his arms came back into their normal position. It was Nick who cut the rope from his foot.

"Teddy! I was afraid you were——"

"Roy! I thought you were——"

They both stopped. Teddy put out his hand and, for a brief moment, it met Roy's in a firm grip. That grip told what was in the heart of each better than if they had spoken. Then Roy wanted to know why the men had been so long in coming.

"Did you get lost, Ted? What happened?"

"Sure thing! Got all turned around and nearly came back to the camp fire once. Then I saw my mistake and started again. Had hard work finding the boys. They had gone on and Nick was half crazy when he found we

weren't with them. He was acting like a wild man when I came up."

"Good old Nick!" Roy reached over and squeezed the hand of his cowboy friend.

"But what happened to you?" Teddy wanted to know. "What became of Cagey and those other two rustlers? How did you happen to get trussed up like that?"

Roy laughed. Now it was all over with he could see the humorous side of the affair.

"I had a little argument with our friends, and they got the best of it," he said. Then he told hurriedly all that had occurred since Teddy had left.

"We know now, for sure," Roy went on, "that Harvard Hooley is at the bottom of all this. Also that the men are dissatisfied with him and that it wouldn't take much to get them to bolt—at least, Art and Hank. I wouldn't be surprised, either, if some of the others felt the same way. Hooley wants to hog everything, and it's his greediness that's going to be his downfall."

"You bet!" Teddy was himself again now that he had found Roy was unharmed. It had been a terrible strain on the boy, making his way through the darkness that night, but now it was over he was eager for more excitement. 。

"Did you tell father about Hooley wanting to make another raid on the X Bar X at once? What did he say?"

"He didn't think that Hooley and his rustlers could get there," replied Teddy, "but he sent one of the men back to the X Bar X to caution them there. Those three men have warned the ranches all around and have come back. Gus will tell you about that."

"We sure did some riding," said Gus Tripp modestly, "and we hustled the fellows up. They're on their way now to join us. And what do you think?" Gus stopped to laugh. "Bug Eye took his old chariot and beat us to a couple of places. When we got there the men had already gone."

"Good old Bug Eye! Wish he was here now." Roy greatly liked the eccentric fellow. "His heart's in the right place, even if sometimes his chariot isn't."

"But didn't you see those three fellows who tied me up?" Roy wanted to know.

Teddy shook his head.

"Not a sign of them. But they didn't go to father at all about a ransom for you. Likely as not they got scared and went back to Hooley to report. We'll find them there when we get to Rustlers' Gap."

"Mr. Manley said we all were to come back at once," said Nick Looker, glancing at his watch. "We'd better be starting so we can get some sleep before we all leave."

"Most morning now," said Roy wearily. "You were gone hours and hours, Teddy. Reckon it's about five o'clock now."

Teddy grinned and looked at Nick.

"What's the time, Nick? You're the only one in this outfit who's got a watch, since Roy's and mine were stolen by that rascal."

"Half-past eleven. Teddy made it an hour. Quick work, I tell you, considering he got lost, too."

"Half-past eleven!" Roy would not believe it until he had looked at Nick's watch. "Sure it's right, Nick?"

"Absolutely. This old dinger hasn't gone wrong in years."

Roy was reluctantly convinced. "I thought it was a couple of days, I'll tell a maverick. Gosh, I never had time go so slowly in my life. Next time we come on a hunt like this I'm going to bring an alarm clock."

"Let's go!" Now that he was assured that the two X Bar X boys were safe, Nick Looker was all business again. "To-morrow will be another day, and I'll bet it won't be gone before we get those rascals—Hooley and all of them."

"Keep a sharp look-out for those fellows," urged Roy, as the party started. "We might capture them and bring

them in, after all. Wouldn't that be a lark? I'd like to see what Cagey would have to say then."

Teddy led the way, with which he was now familiar, and the others followed single file. Nothing startling happened, and in less than an hour they rejoined the punchers. Most of them were asleep, tired from the adventures of the day, but Peter Ball and Mr. Manley were sitting by the fire conversing in low tones.

Mr. Manley's eyes shone when he greeted his sons, but his face grew grave as they told him their story.

"You shouldn't go off like that," he said. "Remember what your mother would say if she knew it. Be more careful next time."

"We'll stick close to the others after this, won't we, Ted?" promised Roy.

"You bet!" But down in his heart Teddy hoped that they would have another adventure the coming day.

"Let's turn in, boys. To-morrow is going to be the great day, I think. We better get all the sleep we can."

The boys did not need any further urging. Teddy was asleep in a few minutes and was soon dreaming of riding single-handed into Rustlers' Gap and demanding that Harvard Hooley should surrender.

Chapter XXI

NEARING THE GOAL

Morning on Red Rock Mountain lived up to the name of the range. It broke red and lurid, the sun bathing the high pinnacles of the brownish-red rocks, from whence the mountain obtained its name, with a ruddy light. The heavy dew of the night before caused them to shine and glisten like fiery shafts, standing like watchful sentinels over the army of trees that grew on its sloping sides.

Long, however, before the sun had risen above the highest peaks, the company of cattlemen and punchers

was astir. Breakfast was cooked and eaten. It consisted of bread, bacon, and beans, of which the expedition had taken an ample store. The broncos were fed and watered from a brook near by and were soon saddled and ready for the day's work. The animals seemed to sense the importance of the part they were to play, and whinnied and rubbed their noses on the arms of the rangers, as the bridles were fastened and the bits put in their mouths.

From information brought by the three riders who had been sent for reinforcements, Mr. Manley and Peter Ball were convinced that the men from the other ranches would soon join them, and it was decided to ride forward without further delay in pursuit of the rustlers.

It was shortly after six o'clock when the cavalcade started, Mr. Ball and Mr. Manley riding ahead, as was their custom, with Roy, Teddy and Nick Looker next in line and the other punchers following. The herdsmen were as eager as were the owners of the X Bar X and the 8 X 8 to get into the fray, and boasted good-naturedly among themselves what they would do when they met the despised rustlers face to face.

"Watch me," said Cass Cooper confidently to Gus Tripp, as they rode along. "I'll show you some stunts with this here string," twirling his lariat, which he carried conveniently looped on the horn of his saddle. "Wait until I get within reach of one of those rascals!" Swish, and Cass whirled the rope around his head dramatically. "Another rustler will bite the dust. I'm a Jim dandy when it comes to roping critters."

Gus grinned.

"Bet you a new pipe I'll ring more than you do." Gus was always ready to back his boasts, no matter what the wager might be. "A new corncob. You can get it for me the next time you go to Eagles."

"Won't be me who'll get it." Cass was sure. "Why, in the rodeo couple of years ago I——" and Cass went on

to tell of his prowess with the lariat of which he was justly proud.

In an hour the men had reached a high plateau, of which there were many among the hills and defiles of Red Rock Mountain. The riding was easier here, and the men spread out in fan-like formation, "riding wide" as the ranchers called it.

Over the level ground they went at high speed. The broncos, wearied a little by their climbing of the hills and the treacherous footings over which they had passed the previous day, found the soft grass of the plateau a delight. They kicked up their heels and whinnied loudly as the men let them have their heads, and scampered away as if they knew the goal was just beyond.

On this plateau there was abundant evidence that a herd of cattle of considerable size had lately passed. The grass was trampled down in a long swath, and on every side could be seen where the herd had grazed. A detour had been made to the left, which the cowboys followed eagerly. It proved, however, to lead only to a small brook where the cattle had been watered, so the punchers turned and were soon crossing the flat again.

At the end of the level space there rose another high mountain over which the men must pass. Behind it, they believed, lay Rustlers' Gap. It was new territory to all of them, however, and they proceeded with caution, not knowing what pitfalls or ambushes might await them.

"Don't look good to me," observed Gus.

It was a desolate tract, that last range of Red Rock Mountain. The slope, which rose gently at first and farther on more steeply, was dotted here and there with trees that had been burned almost leafless by summer suns. The land on the incline lay completely open to the brazen sky. It had long since been beaten into submission and only half-heartedly ventured to try to produce anything in the way of vegetation.

The men and broncos toiled wearily up the side of the

slope, stopping often to rest, while the sun beat down mercilessly upon both men and animals.

"Whew, it's hot, I'll tell a maverick!" Roy wiped the perspiration from his forehead with a red silk handkerchief that Nell Willis had given him on a recent birthday. He had carried it each day since in his pocket, and it had escaped the notice of the rustlers on the day that they had robbed him of most of his belongings.

"For once I agree with my brother. I'll say he's right this time." Teddy liked to tease under any circumstances.

"'Course. When wasn't I right?"

"Last night. Didn't you think I'd been gone most all night and it wasn't much over an hour?"

"Poof! Nobody can tell time in the dark. Was too busy watching those rascals to know anything else."

When the men reached the top of the range they were disappointed. They had thought that just beyond they would find Rustlers' Gap, but a further range of hills loomed before them. There was nothing to do but to go on.

"It's farther than we thought, Peter," said Mr. Manley, who was just as disappointed as the men to find that the goal was not to be reached so easily. "Red Rock Mountain is an unknown territory to us. We ought to have explored it before."

Peter Ball nodded.

"Yes. Always thought I'd come up here some day. But you know how it is. I'm always busy at the 8 X 8 and never seemed to get the time."

Bardwell Manley was gazing at the sky. A thick haze had enveloped the sun and to the south great thunder heads of white-capped clouds were beginning to rise.

"There's going to be another storm, Peter. I had hoped we would get this thing settled to-day, but it looks as if we would have to seek shelter before long. It's too bad."

"Can't be helped." Mr. Ball believed in taking things as they came and not worrying over what could not be avoided. "We'll make that other range, I reckon, before it breaks. We'll find a place, no doubt, where we can camp for a while."

As the men climbed the hills and rode through the narrow defiles, a sudden rift in the mountain came into view. On one side was a cliff, outjutting, which thrust forward a great overhanging shelf of rock, which looked as though it might fall any minute, yet had been held there securely for centuries. On the other side, the rock rose sheer and high, without vegetation, an impassible barrier to the east. At the farther end of this canyon, which was about half a mile long, could be seen four enormous trees, two on either side which leaned strangely on each other, entwining their branches as though depending upon their neighbours for support.

Through the narrow opening at the northern end could be seen an expanse of green fields in the valley beyond and specks of white and red moving slowly about.

"Rustlers' Gap!" Teddy and Roy shouted it in unison.

The excited punchers strained their eyes at the cleft in the mountain, trying to see what was beyond.

"Come on!" shouted Teddy, throwing his hat into the air and catching it on his head. "See who'll be the first through!"

The punchers spurred their horses, that leaped forward, but Mr. Manley called them back.

"Wait, boys. Don't be in a hurry. We've got to talk this over and decide how to proceed. A small force of men could hold the end of that gap against an army, I'm thinkin'. No use takin' any unnecessary risks. What do you say, Peter?"

Peter Ball was sweeping the rift in the rock with his field glasses, and it was a minute before he answered.

"You're right, Bardwell," he said at last, putting down the glasses. "As near as I can make out, there's two ways to get through. An upper trail and a lower. We've got to decide which one we can use with the least risk to our men."

At this the punchers clamoured loudly.

"Don't think of us! We'll go anywhere and beat the whole bunch of 'em! Let's get at the dirty rascals! Whoopee-e! Let's go!"

But Mr. Manley was firm.

"No; I want to talk this thing over with Peter. If any of you men should be drawn into an ambush and killed, I'd never forgive myself. We want to get the rustlers and the cattle, and we will; but we've got to plan our operations first. An army doesn't rush in helter-skelter just because the enemy's in front of it."

The men reluctantly saw the wisdom of this advice and contented themselves, lounging and smoking while Mr. Ball and Mr. Manley were in conference.

"The lower trail would be the easier," argued Peter Ball. "It is wider and we could make a concerted rush. Even if the rustlers did make a stand at the end, I believe we could break through."

"Perhaps." Mr. Manley chewed the end of his corn-cob pipe. "But I think the upper trail would be the best. We would have to go in single file most of the way, but the advantage would be in our being higher. We could fire down on the men below and stand less chance of having our men hit. I don't want to lose any, Peter."

"I'll give in. You're always thinking of others, Bardwell. That's something I've always admired about you. I reckon you're right. Yes, we'll take the upper trail."

A sudden darkness fell upon Red Rock Mountain. A flash of lightning streaked across the sky, then came a crash of thunder. The clouds that had been gathering

quickly enveloped the high peaks, and the view of Rustlers' Gap and the valley beyond was obscured.

"We're in for it!" Mr. Manley spoke sharply. "Nick, get the men and horses under that cliff there. It will protect us a little from the storm. I think it's going to be a bad one."

In less than ten minutes after the punchers had sought shelter beneath the overhanging rocks, the storm broke. The wind came first in great puffing gusts that bent and swayed the tall trees, some of them a century old, as if they had been saplings. Then the black, low-hanging clouds that marched over Red Rock Mountain like an advancing army bent on conquest, began to discharge their ammunition of rain.

Down it came in great, swirling gusts that beat in under the cliff where the men and boys had taken refuge, and caused them to hug the farther wall in their effort to keep dry.

Then with a roar the tempest pounced upon the mountain. The wind swept through the woods fiercely. By the continuous lightning could be seen bending and breaking trees, that all around went down under the onslaught of the elements. The men donned their ponchos and blanketed the broncos, but the swirling, whirling rain found its way to the very back of the cliff, and men and beasts were soon covered with the spray.

At last, after an hour, the bombardment of the thunder subsided and the lightning grew less vivid. The wind stopped suddenly, as if some one had shut off an electric fan. Then it began to blow again softly, whining and sobbing in the tops of the trees and sighing through the sodden leaves that dripped continuously like the patter of a rapid-fire gun.

The rain, that had decreased in volume, now settled down into a steady downpour and gave no evidence of letting up. Under the cliff, now that the beating wind had stopped, the men began to make themselves as

comfortable as possible. A fire was kindled out of a few dry sticks that had been piled there by previous storms. This gave a weird, ghostly light by which the men unpacked some provisions and prepared to eat.

"It isn't going to stop, I'll tell a maverick." Roy had been out to investigate, and now came back under the cliff with his coat glistening with the raindrops.

Mr. Manley smiled grimly.

"I think, Peter," he said, turning to Mr. Ball, who had taken off his coat and was wringing it before trying to dry it in front of the fire, "it's going to be a bad night."

Chapter XXII

THE MOUNTAIN CORRAL

The prediction of Mr. Manley that the storm would last all night was correct. Until the early morning hours the rain hammered and pounded, like a thousand carpenters nailing on a huge roof over Red Rock Mountain. Then its intensity began to lessen, and at last, just before dawn, it ceased entirely. The wind, which had shifted to the north, blew briskly and swept away the clouds in great masses to the south.

The sun, tingeing the pinnacles of the mountain with ruby and crimson, seemed to leap suddenly upward from behind the dark hills, so quickly did it come, and the valleys below were flooded with its golden light.

Roy and Teddy were up early. They had determined that nothing should happen unless they were present and, although tired from the exertions of the previous day, were awake at the first faint streaks of dawn. They had started to climb to a high peak, "just to see what could be seen," as Teddy expressed it. Roy, who was behind, stopped to look at a peculiar-shaped flower that was growing beside the trail, but Teddy, impatient to get to the top, kept on.

Suddenly, Roy heard a shout.

"Quick, Roy! Hurry! There they are! The whole kit and boodle of them! Gosh, what luck!"

With two bounds Roy was by Teddy's side and saw what Teddy saw.

In the valley below, in a natural mountain corral, were several hundred head of cattle. Scattered around the plateau were a number of men in cowboy garb. They were riding rather aimlessly, so the X Bar X boys thought. It was a peaceful, pastoral scene, and gave no intimation of the stirring drama that was soon to be enacted upon that grass-covered plain.

"We've got 'em!" Teddy was so excited he could hardly talk. "We've got 'em, Roy! They're ours!"

Roy grinned.

"They're not ours yet, Ted. Just at present they're Harvard Hooley's. Forgotten all those lessons you took in English at old Hopper?"

"Oh, piffle!" Teddy was disgusted that his brother should tease him at such a moment. "We're not school-boys any more. We're men now," and Teddy drew himself up proudly.

"Let's tell father and the punchers. Race you to the camp," and Roy darted away.

Mr. Manley and Peter Ball, as well as the herdsmen, were as excited as the X Bar X boys, and soon all had climbed the hill and looked down into the mountain corral. Mr. Manley's eyes flashed as he trained his glasses on the grazing cattle.

"There's our best hundred!" he exclaimed, pointing to a group of steers that were contentedly munching the grass on the extreme left of the herd. "They seem to be well taken care of. Hooley's no fool, and hasn't hurried them. Now for breakfast, and then we'll start."

The men had scarcely returned to their camp and were hurriedly frying bacon and making coffee when a shout came from Roy.

"There they come! The punchers from the other ranches! Hooray! Now, Harvard Hooley, you'll get yours, I'll tell a maverick!"

Coming up the slope were over a dozen cowboys, all heavily armed and mounted on their best broncos. In a few minutes they had leaped from their ponies and were all eager for the fray.

"Breakfast first," said Mr. Manley. "Then for the fight!"

"Oh, shucks!" A lean, tall puncher from the Three X ranch voiced the sentiment of the others. "Let's not eat! We can't get at those rascals too soon."

But Mr. Manley was obdurate.

"There's plenty for you all, boys," he said. "There's a hard day's work before us and we must be fortified."

The men ate hurriedly, and in fifteen minutes were inspecting their guns, tightening the saddle girths of their broncos, and seeing that everything was in ship-shape condition. At a call from Mr. Manley they gathered around him, to listen to what he had to say.

"Goin' to try to make a speech again, boys," he began, "which most of you know I can't do. What I want to say is this: I'm afraid there's goin' to be some fightin' before the rustlers finally give in, as they must eventually before our superior force. I don't want you men to run any unnecessary risks. I know you'll all do your best, but be careful. Many of you have families at home, the same as I have, and we must think of them. Now we're ready. Let's start!"

"You can count on us!" sang out Nick Looker, but his words were drowned by the cheers of the men as they leaped to their saddles.

"One moment," and Mr. Manley raised his hand. "We have decided to take the upper trail. Peter Ball and I will lead the way. Go as silently as possible. We want to get as close as we can before we're discovered. When they do catch sight of us, rush them."

Down the slope that led to the mountain corral, the punchers rode slowly, holding their broncos in check lest they stumble or fall.

As the trail wound around, down the side of Red Rock Mountain, there were times when the sight of the corral was obscured by clumps of trees and bushes. Red Rock was noted for its heavy vegetation, as well as its high pinnacles, and for minutes at a time nothing could be seen of the rustlers or the cattle.

"Wouldn't it be a joke," Roy said to his father in a low tone, "if we should get right on them without their knowing it?"

"Can't do it, son." Mr. Manley smiled at the boy's eagerness. "They'll see us soon now, that's sure."

As the party emerged from a clump of red oaks, they saw a sudden stir of activity among the rustlers. Merf were riding about wildly and shouting. Two shots were fired which brought other rustlers who had been eating breakfast in a grove near by. The advancing punchers had been discovered. The alarm was given.

Evidently, the rustlers had a preconcerted plan of action. To the surprise of the punchers, they galloped across the field, twelve of them in single file, and began to climb the trail that led up the side of Rustlers' Gap. At the bottom of the Gap, hidden from the view of the punchers by an overhanging cliff, was a cross trail. This skirted the base of Red Rock Mountain and formed an outlet to a road to the east. The rustlers had found this trail, and had planned to use it as an avenue of escape, if necessary.

Suddenly the sharp reports of guns broke upon the air. Bullets whistled, spattered and flattened themselves against the hard surface of the cliff. The punchers' broncos reared and snorted in fright, but the shots went wild and no harm was done.

Gus Tripp dashed up to Mr. Manley, who was in the lead of the herdsmen.

· "Say, boss, got an idea. Suppose some of us fellers go back and take the lower trail through the Gap, and get around behind those rascals. Then we'll get 'em comin' and goin'."

"Fine, Gus! Take five of the men with you. But look out. They may have laid an ambush, thinking you'd do just that."

"I'll look out, boss," and Gus dashed away with his five companions.

Some of the more venturesome of the punchers in the main party urged their broncos ahead of the others down the incline and exchanged shots with the rustlers. So far as they could see, no damage was done. So, tethering their horses, four of them, all men from X Bar X, rushed upon a small detachment of the rustlers, who had been caught unawares, and engaged them in a hand-to-hand fight.

Cass Cooper, who had tripped and fallen on a protruding root, was just picking himself up when a shadow appeared beside a bush about a hundred feet away. It glided across the ground to another bush, merged with it for a moment, and then came on again. That shadow was making for the blackness cast by a huge rock, and gained it before Cass got to his feet.

Zip! Zing! A flash of light streaked past Cass's head, and a knife bit into a tree just above. In another moment Cass had dashed upon his enemy. The butt of his gun swung upwards, then down with a dull thud. The rustler fell without a sound, and Cass, after satisfying himself that the rustler was only knocked out for a time, sped on.

The punchers on the upper trail continued to fire, but as the main body of the rustlers were protected by the cliff none of them was injured.

Teddy, wild with excitement, was firing right and left, but, as with the others, none of his shots told.

"Save your ammunition, Ted." Roy was calm and

collected in the face of danger. "Wait until we get them in the open, then blaze away."

The men were riding slowly down the sharp ridge of the rock barrier that divided the upper trail from the lower. They could hear the rustlers crashing through the bushes below. A long searching examination of the slope and crest of the next ridge revealed the fact that the rustlers were not making for the high hills, as the punchers had supposed.

"There's a trail down there we don't know about, I'm sure," shouted Roy to Teddy as the younger brother paused to load again. "Let's charge them, Ted, shall we?"

Mr. Manley caught the boy's words.

"No, no, Roy! They'd only shoot as you came down, and we can't afford to take the risk."

"They'll get away, dad, if we don't hurry. What if we do get the cattle back? What I want is to get a shot at that scoundrel, Hooley. He's my meat! Can't I go?"

But Mr. Manley was obdurate and Roy was crest-fallen. A sudden shout from Nick Looker caused him to look around.

"Down, Roy! Down quick! He's got a bead on you!"

Without waiting to find out who had drawn a bead on him, Roy Manley flattened himself to the ground.

Zzzzing! Spat! A bullet struck a tree by which he had been standing, and had it not been for Nick's warning, the result might have been disastrous.

Nick was crouching behind a rock and pointing his rifle downwards.

"It's Hooley," he said to Roy, who crawled up beside him. "He's laying for you two boys. Saw him before, trying to hit Teddy, but Ted moved just in time. He's in that grove down there, I'm sure. I saw the smoke from his gun when he fired. Shoot into it, Roy, and if he runs out I'll get him."

Bang! Bang! Roy fired twice, but the shots seemed to have no effect, as they were not returned. But Nick never took his eyes from the clump of aspens, behind which he was certain that Harvard Hooley had taken refuge.

"Sh-h-h. He's coming out." Nick scarcely dared breathe.

Slowly, very slowly, there was some one moving among the aspens. Nick brought his rifle to his shoulder and stood rigid. A leg came out first, and Nick did not hesitate.

Bang!

A man lunged forward, grasping his knee, his face distorted with pain. With a sudden twist, he rolled behind a big boulder and was lost to view. In that instant, however, both recognised the red and black checked sweater of Harvard Hooley.

"Got him!" shouted Nick Looker in glee, and Roy let out a yell that carried dismay to the rustlers below.

"Whoopee-e! Yeo-o-ow! Skidoo-oo!"

Chapter XXIII

CASS BECOMES A HERO

When the cowboys heard of the downfall of the "educated gent", as they called Harvard Hooley, a shout arose the like of which had never before been heard on Red Rock Mountain. Mr. Manley, however, grew grave as he listened to Nick Looker's account of how he had brought down the leader of the rustlers.

"I'd rather he'd been taken alive," he said. "I wanted to talk with him, for I believe he would tell all about the plans of the rustlers if convinced the game was lost. We must search and find him."

"Don't believe he was hurt much," interposed Roy eagerly. "Nick got him in the knee, but he moved pretty

lively, getting behind that rock. Bet he can shoot some yet. He's just the kind of fellow who'd play possum and then blaze away when we least expected it."

"I'd like to get my hands on him, too." Teddy could not forget the treatment he had received at the hands of the rustler. "If I do, I'll choke——" and Teddy clenched his fists and shook them as though he were shaking a rat.

Mr. Manley smiled at his son's words.

"We'll let the sheriff deal with him," he said. "If he gets well, a good long term in jail will give him time to think. None of our men are hurt, are they, Nick?"

Nick shook his head. "Not much. Jim Casey got nicked in the hand, but he bound it up. It didn't amount to much. Those fellows drove off the stock all right, but they're not much when it comes to shooting. Couldn't hit the side of a barn unless they were right up against it."

"Fight isn't over yet. Bet our boys have got through the Gap and are after them. Hear that!"

A volley of shots came from below, mingled with the shouts of men and the frightened cries of the broncos.

"There's some of them, boys," yelled Roy. "Lay low, don't let them get you."

Several of the rustlers could be seen on the lower trail, dodging behind trees and firing wildly. Evidently, the scouting party under Gus Tripp had cut them off from their escape and was making things hot for them.

The men on the upper trail dropped on their knees behind rocks and trees and awaited their opportunity. Teddy brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

Crack!

One of the rustlers, who apparently thought he was protected by a fallen tree, gave a howl of pain, dropped his rifle, and grasped his right wrist. Then, without more ado, he started to run back into the mountain corral

where the cattle were still grazing peacefully, despite the sound of the shots.

"Get him, Nick!" Teddy yelled, as the man came into full view, still howling with pain. "Pot him off. Don't let him get away."

Mr. Manley, however, protested.

"Let him go, Nick. He can't do any more damage, and to shoot him now would be nothing short of murder. We don't want his blood on our hands. We'll round him up later."

Nick, reluctantly, put up his rifle. He would have liked nothing better than to have taken a shot at the rustler, but he realised the wisdom of Bardwell Manley's words.

Teddy, however, was disgusted.

"Dad's too easy," he told Roy, as the X Bar X boys watched eagerly for any of the rustlers who might, in an unguarded moment, expose themselves. "Ought to shoot the whole kit and boodle of 'em. Would if I had my way."

"Fire-cater!" Roy taunted. "Ought to call you the wild man of Red Rock Mountain." He knew Teddy's impulsive nature and could not resist the temptation to give his younger brother a lecture, even in that exciting moment.

"Dad's always right, isn't he! Of course we don't want to kill them. Jail's the best place for fellows like them, not a hole in the ground. Six months in the jug, and they'll eat out of your hand."

"Poof!" Teddy still wanted to maintain his point. "They'd pot us if they got the chance, wouldn't they? Saw you getting ready to fire yourself, 'ust as dad spoke. Hope we get Star and Flash," he added. "Haven't seen them, though."

"We will." Roy was confident. "Reckon they've got them tethered somewhere in the woods. We'll find them when the fighting's over. And dad's papers, too."

"You bet. Look out, Roy!" as a bullet from below whistled past the boy's head and bit into a tree. "There's some fight left in those fellows yet."

"I'll tell a maverick there is!" Roy picked up one of the leaves that had been ripped from a branch by the bullet. "Wouldn't have liked to have that one hit me," and Roy pointed to the tree where the bullet was imbedded. "That came from a big gun. Wonder where they got it."

"Stole it, probably." Teddy could never believe that a rustler got anything at all by honest means. "But we're not doing anything, Roy. Let's move over to the left. We ought to get a shot at them from there."

The defiles of Red Rock Mountain were not adapted to close fighting. Many paths intersected each other. Some of them led nowhere, ending in a wall of rock. Others curved snake-like along the brink of a ravine, while narrower ones found their way from the upper trail to the lower.

It was down one of these narrow paths that the punchers were descending. It was treacherous footing for the broncos. Even the usually sure-footed little animals found it difficult not to slip on the carpeting of loose stones and pine needles and the leaves that had not yet become dry from the recent storm.

The smaller party, led by Gus Tripp, had ridden at full speed through the Gap, disregarding for the moment Mr. Manley's words of caution.

"Sooner we get there, sooner it will be over," Gus had argued, and the men with him were of the same mind. So they had charged along, unmindful of any ambush that might have been laid, and soon rounded the corner of the cliff, coming suddenly upon a small party of their enemy. Caught between two fires, the rustlers made but a feeble resistance. There were only a few of them in that party, and they believed it was wiser to surrender and hope that Hooley and others, who were farther up

the trail, might see their predicament and come to their rescue.

The engagement between the main parties now became general. Both fired volley after volley, without seeming effect. Roy, watching from a hillock above, was disgruntled at the aim of both sides.

One of the rustlers had come face to face with Cass Cooper. Both men were surprised at the sudden meeting and, for a moment, hesitated as if at a loss what to do. They had exhausted their ammunition, but the rustler carried a double-tongued whip in his hand. With a sudden motion he brought it down on Cass's bare neck. Even at a distance, the X Bar X boys could see a great red welt spring up where the whip thongs had struck.

For just a moment Cass wavered, stung cruelly by the blow. Then, with a bellow like a maddened bull, he charged.

The punchers of the X Bar X and the 8 X 8 still like to talk of that fight on Red Rock Mountain. Every new cowboy who is engaged has to hear about it.

The men were about the same size. Both had been hardened by the summers' sun and the winters' cold, the wind and the rain. The men of both camps stopped firing, and watched the fighters eagerly.

Neither man had ever taken lessons in boxing. Cass fought with short, vicious swings, dancing about and dodging the heavy, hammer-like punches of the rustler. A blow by Cass caught the rustler squarely on the jaw. A startled look came into the man's eyes. He wavered for an instant, reached out blindly, and clutched at the air. Then, finding no support, slowly toppled and fell in a crumpled heap on the ground.

Teddy, far above them, began to count with his arm.

"One, two, three, four, five." Then as the rustler began to struggle to his feet. "And five are ten. He's out!"

"Fine referee you'd make, Ted." Roy's eyes were

dancing. "He isn't out by a long way. Look out, Cass!" he shouted, as the rustler, having regained his feet, made a vicious jab with his left.

Cass, unprepared for the sudden attack, tried to dodge, slipped, and caught the blow on his ear. It staggered him for a moment, and he reeled backward, almost losing his balance. The rustler followed up his advantage and sent another to Cooper's stomach. He misjudged the distance, however, and the blow landed lightly. Cass whirled and struck out with his right. The rustler saw the fist coming and dodged.

Then there followed a close-up bout. The men clinched and pounded each other wherever they could get in a blow. So fast and furious came the blows that the watching punchers could not tell which man had the advantage.

Finally, Cass gave ground. The rustler, thinking he had his man beaten, lunged forward. The cowboy came back quickly with a right hook to the stomach. The rustler doubled and dropped, the wind knocked out of him.

"That settles it! One in the bread basket! Bully for you, Cass, old boy!" Teddy was shrieking wildly in his joy at the cowboy's victory.

Cooper assisted the man to his feet—he was now weak and wobbling—and half-dragged, half-carried him to the centre of the plateau, where a number of the punchers were guarding the few rustlers who had already surrendered.

Peter Ball and Mr. Manley were as pleased as the X Bar X boys at the result of the duel.

"Always knew Cass was a fighter, but I didn't think he was as good as that," said Mr. Manley. "Wouldn't like to have got that last punch of his, would you, Peter?"

Mr. Ball, who was serious-minded and seldom laughed, allowed himself the luxury of a grin.

"Right you are, Bardwell. I'm afraid it won't be long before you'll be losing Cooper to the roped ring. A man who can fight like that could make money giving exhibitions. He could stage an act, 'How I Did It on Red Rock Mountain,'" and Peter Ball grinned again.

"No." Mr. Manley was certain. "Cass would never go in the prize ring. He likes the out-of-door life too well, and the cattle, and above all our boys. He hasn't been with us very long, but he's intensely loyal. But now, Peter, I think we ought to finish this thing and start for home."

The punchers needed no urging. Slowly, keeping watch on all sides, they went on down the trail. Each man guided his bronco with his left hand and had a pistol in his right. They were not going to be taken unawares by some lurking rustler. The fight was nearly won without a casualty, and there must not be one at the last moment.

Nearly down to the lower trail the punchers came in sight of a cross trail that skirted the edge of a ravine. There, riding slowly upon a superb black bronco, was a lone horseman. The man had a strip of cloth, evidently torn from his shirt, tied around one knee. His hat was gone, his face white and drawn with pain, and he sagged in the saddle. On his shoulders was a torn and ragged sweater, and from what remained of it the X Bar X boys could see that the pattern was a red and black check.

Harvard Hooley, the leader of the rustlers, was riding alone.

All of a sudden, Hooley looked up and saw the punchers on the trail. His face flushed with hate, then grew white again as his bronco stumbled and wrenched the man's injured knee. Snatching his pistol from the holster, he opened fire on the men above him.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Four times the shots rang out. Then there was a click

as Hooley tried to fire again, but the other two chambers of his pistol were empty.

One of the shots went so close to Roy's head that it cut out a lock of hair. Gyp, his bronco, reared wildly, and seemed to be about to plunge down the sharp incline that led to the lower trail.

Roy held him well in hand, however, but Gyp's hoofs dislodged a rock that was loose in his path. The rock slid down the side of the hill, gaining in velocity each moment. Hooley's bronco was directly in its path. With a sharp cry of fear as the rock struck it, the bronco was taken off its feet, and Harvard Hooley pitched over its head.

For a moment the rustler hung on the edge of the cliff, trying to find a place that would hold. But the loose dirt offered no such refuge, and the chief of the rustlers, with a cry, plunged down into the ravine.

Chapter XXIV

THE CONFESSION

The fighting was over. All of the rustlers, with the exception of three who had escaped, had been herded together into the middle of the natural mountain corral and were guarded by some of the punchers.

Mr. Manley had no concern regarding the missing men. Alone, without food, and probably unfamiliar with the perplexing trails of Red Rock Mountain, they must sooner or later give themselves up.

The owners and the cowboys of the combined ranches swept on to the field in true western style. They were overjoyed at their victory. The punchers shouted, waved their hats, and fired their pistols in an improvised celebration. The rustlers, who had been made prisoners, were a crestfallen, sorry-looking set of men. They knew

that they were beaten, and to hold out against such an overwhelming force was worse than useless.

Mr. Manley was anxious to know the fate of Harvard Hooley.

"We've got to find him," he said seriously. "He may be badly hurt or dying. I want you four, Roy, Teddy, Nick Looker, and Pop Burns, to go into the ravine and find him. Bring him back, dead or alive. Don't return until you do."

The men and the boys went down into the ravine where they had seen Hooley and his bronco fall, determined to do the bidding of the owner of the X Bar X. In less than an hour they came back, carrying between them an improvised stretcher of boughs and branches, on which was the erstwhile leader of the rustlers. As they came to the centre of the field, where the punchers were assembled, and laid their burden down, Mr. Manley and Peter Ball hurried forward to the man's side. Hooley looked at them with a grim expression on his white, strained face.

"Well, Hooley," said Mr. Manley, "you're beaten. I'm sorry that you've been hurt," he added, not unkindly. "Is it very bad?"

"One of your men got me in the knee," responded Hooley faintly. "But my fall wasn't what it might have been. I landed on the top of some trees and they let me down easy, with only a few bumps. I'm through, I guess. Now, what are you going to do with me and the other fellows?"

"The men will be lodged in jail by the sheriff, Hooley, and be tried at the next term of court. I'll have you taken to Hawley, too. There's a small hospital there where they'll fix you up. When you have recovered you will be tried also.

"Tell me, Hooley," went on Mr. Manley, sitting down on a log that was beside the stretcher. "Why did you do it?"

The rustler looked up at the kindly face, in which there was no animosity nor hatred, for a moment before he answered. Then his pale face flushed.

"I'll begin at the beginning," he stated, as the punchers gathered around, eager to hear his story. "I was born in Boston of a good family. My father was a lawyer, one of the best in the city, and was desirous that I should follow in his footsteps. I went through school and then had two years at Harvard."

The rustler stopped and a spasm of pain crossed his face and his hand reached towards the injured knee.

"Don't talk if it hurts you." Mr Manley was considerate, although he was anxious to hear the story.

"Thanks. It's all right. My knee got me, though. But I didn't care for that sort of life. I determined to get out at the end of the term. But I didn't have to wait that long. One night, when I'd been drinking, I hit one of the fellows. Hit him pretty hard, I guess, for he keeled over and they couldn't bring him to for several hours. For that fracas I was expelled from the university and had to go home."

The punchers crowded nearer as Hooley paused again.

"When my father heard about it, he was furious. Said I was no son of his; that the family of Hooley had never before had a black sheep; and that he was through with me. He gave me a sum of money and told me never to show my face again.

"That same night I got a train for Cheyenne. I had no idea where I was going, but I wanted to get as far away as possible.

"I bummed around, getting work at the different ranches, for, as I could ride well, I had no trouble in getting work rounding up the cattle after I had been shown a few of the tricks. For several years I drifted

from ranch to ranch, never staying long in one place."

He paused a moment, but Mr. Manley, a bit impatiently, bade him keep on with his story.

"I saw," continued the rustler, "that there was money to be made in the West. It needed capital, though, to start, and I hadn't a cent.

"I was working at that time," he went on, "for a man who had several thousand head of cattle. Every once in a while the cowboys would report that there were ten or a dozen head missing. 'The rustlers got them,' they told me. I soon found out that a rustler was a man who would steal cattle, drive them off and rebrand them, and then ship them away. The punchers tried to find out who did it, but never were able to, and, as the number was small, the owner did not worry much about it. But it set me to thinking.

"Then, one night in a dance hall, I got acquainted with two cowboys and they got confidential. They said they were rustlers and were making a lot of money driving off cattle from the various ranches. We talked until morning, and I decided to throw in my lot with them. The next week a dozen steers disappeared from the Three Star ranch where I was working, and I, too, was missing."

"How long have you been operating in this vicinity, Hooley?" Mr. Manley questioned.

"About a year. My plan was to get work at some ranch, which was not difficult to do, as they almost always wanted an extra hand or two. Then I would find out the lay of the land, map out just how and where we would drive the cattle, and when everything was ready I would notify the other rustlers, who were generally staying in a near-by town."

"I think we know the rest," said Mr. Manley, rising. "Well, we'll fix the stretcher between two ponies and have the boys start with you for Hawley. That knee of

yours needs attention, and the sooner you get to the hospital the better. Lift Hooley off, boys, and we'll tie the stretcher to two of the broncs."

Roy and Teddy lifted Hooley from the bed of branches and the punchers made it fast to the horses. As he lay waiting, Hooley called Teddy to him.

"I like you, young fellow," he said. "Did from the first. I'm sorry I treated you as I did. You don't hold any hard feelings against me, do you?"

"I think you've been a big fool—a fellow with your chances," answered Teddy bluntly.

"Eh? Well, maybe." Hooley paused. "Listen," he went on, and motioned for Teddy to come closer.

"What now?" asked the boy suspiciously.

"See that clump of cottonwoods over to the left?"

"Yes. What about them?"

"You and your brother go over there and you'll find something that will please you. Hurry, before they take me away."

"You mean——" began Teddy.

"Never mind what I mean. Go on over. You won't be sorry."

Chapter XXV.

THE FIND

Wondering what Harvard Hooley could have in mind, Teddy Manley motioned to his brother and in a minute the boys were on their mounts and speeding in the direction of the cottonwoods Hooley had pointed out.

"Maybe it's our broncs," said Roy. "Gee, I hope it is!"

"Same here," returned his brother.

"Or a trap, Teddy?"

"He wouldn't dare send us into a trap—not with things as they are now. No, I guess he wants to make it as easy for himself as possible."

It did not take the lads long to reach the clump of trees. As their eyes swept the grove, Roy uttered a yell of delight.

"Star!"

"And Flash! Gee, this is the best yet!"

There, tethered to two trees, were the long-lost broncos, each in perfect condition. The X Bar X boys fairly embraced the animals, and the broncos whinnied their satisfaction.

"And look! Saddlebags!" cried Teddy. "Let us see what is in them."

Both bags were torn open eagerly.

"See? Our watches!" cried Roy. "And the other things, too!"

"And dad's package! Wow, this is great!" and the boys danced around in glee. "What will the folks say when they hear of this?"

"What will Nell and Curly say?"

Meanwhile, the others were discussing the plans for going home. It was finally decided to take the newly discovered trail. It led around the base of Red Rock Mountain, and, while this was several miles longer than the over-mountain trail, it would not necessitate the climbing of the rocky defiles that were so difficult to traverse.

The rustlers readily agreed to show the men the way over the new trail, seeming glad that the fighting was over and hoping, probably, to appease their captors and thus make it easier for themselves at the coming trial.

In order not to hurry the cattle, it was determined to put them last in the procession, in charge of a few punchers, who would drive them slowly to the X Bar X and the 8 X 8 ranches. The captured rustlers were to be taken under a small guard to the county jail at Hawley, where they would await trial. Harvard Hooley was to be brought to the hospital, and, upon recovery, would be tried also.

When all was in readiness Hooley was carefully lifted to the stretcher, which was lashed between two of the gentler of the broncos. As he lay back upon the green boughs he reached out his hand to Mr. Manley, who had come alongside.

"I am grateful for your kindness," he said hesitatingly. "Another man would have left me to die in the ravine or shot me on sight."

At that moment Roy and Teddy came dashing up with Star and Flash, leading Gyp and Beauty.

"Got your horses back, did you?" said Mr. Manley. "Good!"

"Got more than that, dad," said Roy. "Got all our other things and got your package, too! Here it is," and he handed it over.

"Well, well! This is certainly grand," said the ranchman. He looked the package over hastily. "All here. Fine!" And his face showed his satisfaction.

Then the preparations for departure went on.

Nick Looker, who always carried a whistle, blew a shrill blast.

"All set. Let's go!"

The men leaped to their saddles, the broncos pranced and capered as if they knew that their heads were turned homeward. The procession began to move with the punchers cheering lustily. The conquering heroes were now under way.

Calling him to one side, Peter Ball suggested to Winters of the 8 X 8 that he ride ahead and acquaint those on the X Bar X and the 8 X 8 that the men were returning. Winters was off in a flash, and after some fast riding, arrived at the X Bar X with the welcome news.

Belle Ada at once telephoned the 8 X 8, and long before the men arrived Nell and Ethel came dashing up, to be followed by Mrs. Ball, who had been driven over by Bug Eye. There was great rejoicing and the girls

could scarcely wait for the arrival of the "heroes," as they termed them.

Bug Eye was impatiently scanning the road that led to the X Bar X.

"I can't wait around here, Mum," he said to Mrs. Ball. "Jest got to go and meet those fellers. The old chariot is acting fine these days. Don't act up at all like it used to do. Found out that the carburettor was out of plumb, so the spark plug hit against a valve and——"

Bug Eye did not finish, as the chariot gave a snort and started direct for a post, and it was all that Bug Eye could do to steer it through the gateway. The last that the women saw of Bug Eye and his chariot was a great cloud of dust as the car disappeared around a bend in the road.

Five minutes passed, then ten. A half-hour went by, and the posse that had gone after the rustlers did not appear. The girls began to grow uneasy.

"Don't suppose those rustlers got the best of them after all, do you?" Ethel asked anxiously as she looked at her wrist watch for the twentieth time.

"Couldn't!" Belle Ada was certain. "Seems longer than it is. Why, Winters got in only an hour ago, and it's a long way around Red Rock Mountain."

Nell Willis looked longingly at her bronco that had been tethered to a post. She would have liked to ride out to meet the men, but did not want to propose leaving her aunt and Mrs. Manley. Would the boys never come!

Belle Ada suddenly gave a shout.

"There they are! Look! Down the road! Come on, girls, beat you to them!"

All three girls leaped on their broncos and dashed away, with Belle Ada in the lead. It was not long before they reached the advancing procession.

Bug Eye, who had met the punchers, was heading the procession. The chariot, as if seeming to know that it was a great day and it must be on its good behaviour,

went without a rumble, and Bug Eye drove with one hand. In the other he held a mouth-organ to his lips, from which came the strains of "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town To-night".

As the men reached the X Bar X there was a general scramble. It seemed as if everybody embraced everybody else, and Nell and Ethel allowed the X Bar X boys the privilege of a good big hug.

"Good old X Bar X! Isn't any place like it in the world!" Teddy was beside himself with joy at the way everything had turned out. "'Caus', why? It's home."

Bug Eye had produced an old accordion and was playing away furiously, to which no one paid any attention.

B-a-n-g!

The girls screamed and the punchers reached for their pistols.

"'Tisn't nothin'," said Bug Eye, as he viewed disconsolately a wide rent in the bellows of the accordion. "Only the old music box went and busted itself. My pa had it nigh on to twenty year before me. Now she's gone. Oh, well, the next time I go to Eagles I'll——"